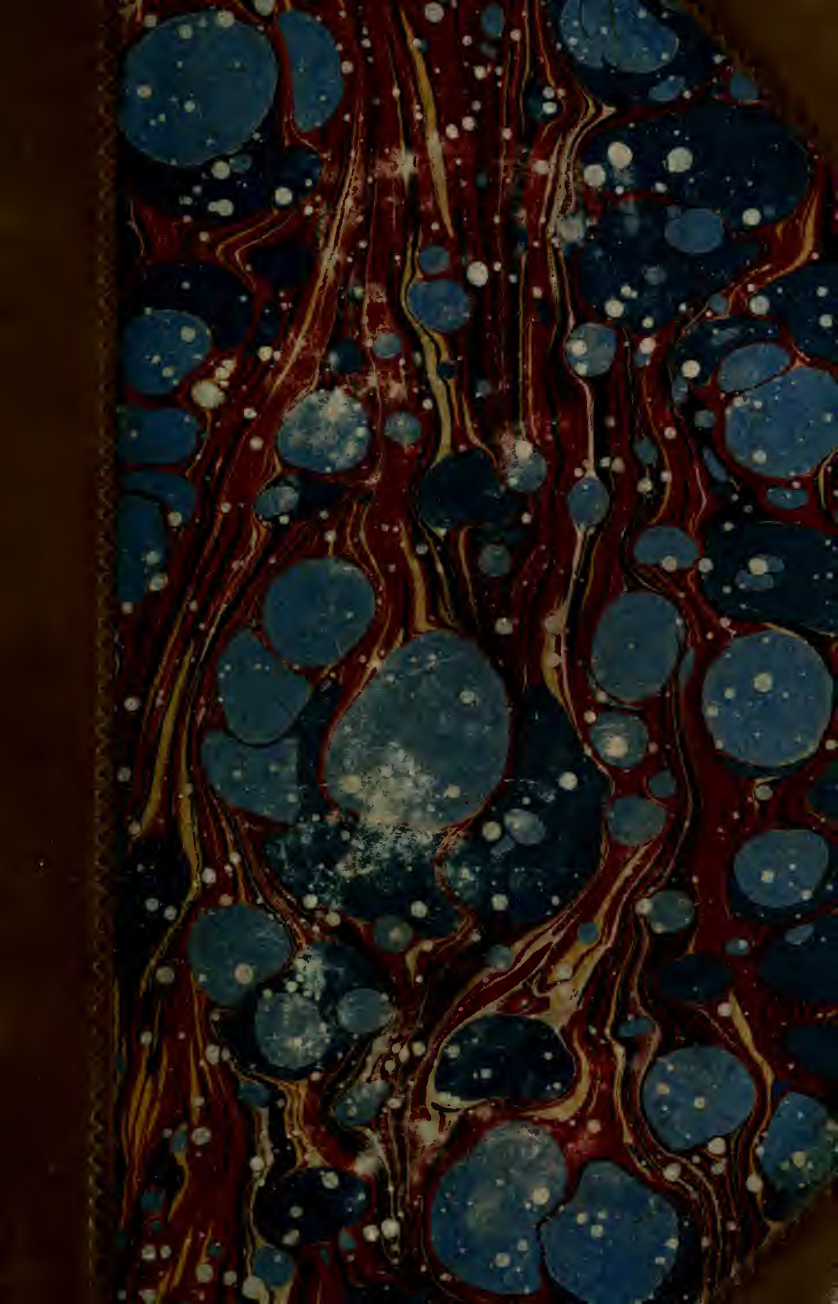

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WISE AS A SERPENT.

VOL. II.

WISE AS A SERPENT.

BY

J. A. ST. JOHN BLYTHE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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WISE AS A SERPENT.

CHAPTER I.

MAUD VERNON BEGINS TO BE UNEASY.

Sir Guy Rivers was not looking by any means serene when he came in to luncheon, after the dean and he had finished their inspection of the church. They had met Pauline at the vicarage gate, just starting for her afternoon's work in the village; and even the dean had been fain to remark, what a very pretty and quiet-looking girl she was.

"She strangely belies all that is said about her, in appearance at least," he said.

"She's a deep one," responded Sir Guy, shortly; "but after all, one must make some allowance for French ideas, I suppose. There is certainly something very taking about her."

He did not speak again until they reached the house.

"Well, Mr. Dean, have you settled the church?" asked Mrs. Darryll.

"I think we are pretty well agreed as to what ought to be done. The squire must decide what shall be done."

"Oh, Guy's in the humour just now," she said, laughing. "He'll spend ten thousand pounds upon it, if you like, if you only keep the bellows applied to his enthusiasm."

"Do you hear what your sister says, Rivers?" asked Mr. Feversham.

"No, I didn't," he answered. "I say, Isabel, Miss Lisle is at the vicarage."

He looked up as he spoke, to find Maud watching him quietly, and to catch the slight change that crossed his face as he spoke.

"You don't mean that?" said Isabel. "Why, I saw her the day we came here, and she never told me she was coming."

"She says she came quite unexpectedly to herself, because Mrs. Wellwood wanted her."

"And why hasn't she been up here?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Mrs. Wellwood has not been able to call because of a cold; and I suppose she didn't care to come without her."

"I wonder she hasn't been up to see me; but I suppose I shall see her soon. If I had had the least idea that Mrs. Wellwood was ill, I would have gone down to the vicarage."

Sir Guy made no answer, and the subject dropped.

"What are we all going to do this afternoon?" Mrs. Darryll asked.

"Miss Feversham and I are going out sketching," replied Maud. "That is to say, if we don't find it too cold."

The rest of the party dispersed, and Maud and Miss Feversham set out, and settling themselves in a sheltered position, proceeded to take just that view of the house which Maud and Mrs. Darryll had admired that morning.

They worked away in silence, both too much absorbed in their occupation to care to talk; and more than a couple of hours had slipped away, when a sudden crash among the brushwood, close behind them, made them both start from their seats—Miss Feversham with a faint scream. In another moment Sir Guy Rivers' black retriever came scrambling through the bushes, while Sir Guy himself appeared on the top of the bank, under which they were sitting.

"Sir Guy!" exclaimed Miss Feversham, "I

shall owe you a grudge for the term of my natural life. Look here, you have ruined the best sketch I have made this year."

She held it up to him, as he swung himself down the bank. It was certainly a deplorable sight. She had upset the little bottle of water she had on the block all over the sketch.

"I really am very sorry," said Sir Guy; "but I hadn't the least idea you were here. But you might make something of it yet, if you only try."

"Yes, don't give it up," said Maud, who had calmly seated herself again, and resumed her work, "you can put it right yet."

Miss Feversham seemed doubtful, but sat down to try; and Sir Guy stretched himself on the ground beside them.

"Please put me and Don in," he said, "and then we will have the sketches framed, and hung up among the family portraits in the picture gallery."

"Ah, yes, that would be just the thing," said Miss Feversham. "Original sketches of disdinguished female artists, and all that kind of thing, you know. They would be such an addition to the picture gallery, wouldn't they, Miss Vernon?"

"I don't doubt they would," replied Maud; "but as I have not seen the picture gallery, I am not in a position to speak very decidedly on the point."

"Not seen the picture gallery!" exclaimed Sir Guy; "you don't mean that, Miss Vernon?"

"Yes, I do. You forget I only arrived yesterday."

"Ah, true, I had forgotten. It seems to me as if you had been here much longer. You must go and look at the pictures presently. There are some really good ones there, besides family portraits. My poor father was a good judge, and he had travelled so much, as a young man, he had had the chance of adding some really valuable pictures to the collection."

"I should like to see them very much," said Maud.

"Well, come now, do," exclaimed Sir Guy, springing on to his feet. "I am sure you have sketched quite as long as is good for you. It is getting abominably cold."

"It is cold, intensely," said Miss Feversham, with a shiver. "Don't you think we had better go, Miss Vernon?"

Maud was quite ready, and they walked

down to the house together. Mrs. Feversham met them at the door.

"Margaret!" she exclaimed, "you are as white as a sheet. What have you been doing? You don't mean you have been sitting sketching all this time? You have got chilled, I am certain. Go to my dressing-room directly, and get warm, and have a cup of tea."

"I am going to the picture gallery, mamma."

"Indeed, you are going to do nothing of the kind," replied her mother. "Be off directly, and get warm."

"I am so sorry," Maud began, "I had no idea Miss Feversham was cold, or I would have proposed to move sooner."

"Not at all," replied Mrs. Feversham. "It is Margaret's own fault, but she is so fond of sketching, she forgets everything when she once gets to work. She is not very strong, or it would not matter."

"I'm awfully glad Mrs. Feversham did carry her off," Sir Guy said, as they proceeded towards the picture gallery.

"Why?" asked Maud.

"Because I want you particularly to look at my mother's picture, and I cannot talk about that when any of that family are by."

Maud made no answer, and after a moment's pause, Sir Guy added, in a lower tone—

"You know Mrs. Feversham was there."

"Yes, I know," replied Maud.

Sir Guy had not overrated the attractions of the picture gallery. Sir Rupert Rivers had, in his earlier wanderings, made many valuable additions to a collection already good, and Sir Guy himself had done something for it. There was a number of old family portraits as well.

"Why, how totally unlike the Riverses you and Isabel are," Maud said, at last.

"Wait a little, and you will understand why that is," Sir Guy replied. "Look here, this is my father."

"Ah, there is a faint trace of him in Isabel, but it is very very slight. Is it a good likeness?"

"I think it must have been, when it was taken; but he was quite an old man, in appearance, by the time I can recollect him. Now look here," he added, moving on to the next picture, after a few moments.

Maud followed, and stood in silence before the portrait of Lady Clara Rivers.

It gave a better idea of her peculiar style of beauty, than the small miniature Sir Guy wore. She was in her riding-habit, with her hat lying

on a table beside her; and the light falling strongly on her golden hair, just, if either had known it, as Sir Rupert had seen her, in her dressing-room, the day of her death.

"Do you wonder, now, that I am enthusiastic about her?" Sir Guy asked, after they had both stood before the picture in silence for some time.

"Not the least," answered Maud.

"It was here she used to play with me, for hours," he continued," all up and down the gallery. She taught me to run alone here. I have sometimes sat here for hours, fancying I could see her stepping backwards down the gallery, and holding out her arms for me to come to her; and at last I almost think I can see her smile at me out of the picture. Oh, mother! mother!"

His tone of intense feeling brought tears into Maud's eyes, but she did not speak. Suddenly he started—

"Pshaw," he exclaimed, "what a sentimental ass you must think me, Miss Vernon."

"My mother died when I was born," Maud said.

The words were simple enough, but there was deep meaning in the tone, and Sir Guy knew he had no cause to fear that Maud Vernon

would ever prove an unsympathizing listener to anything that concerned his mother.

"Do you know who that is?" he asked, moving on to the next picture.

"Yourself, undoubtedly," she replied; "but what a difference a beard and moustache make to you."

"Are they an improvement?"

"Most decidedly."

Maud was right, sadly right. There was something about the mouth that was better hidden. It marred the face, with its expression of irresolution, almost of weakness; and did not harmonize with the singular beauty of the upper part of it.

"It is so like your mother," she added.

"I know it is. I am so glad of it," he replied. "Now here is one more you must look at," and he turned to the opposite side of the gallery.

"Why surely!" Maud exclaimed, "is it? No, it can't be meant for Isabel; it is too old. Is it Lady Bellingham?"

"Exactly," said Sir Guy; "my grandmother."

"Did you ever see her?"

"No. She died when my mother was a baby."

"Then I suppose I may venture to call her a horrible-looking woman?"

"Most undoubtedly you may. I can't imagine

how she could ever have had a daughter like my beautiful mother; and yet she must have been very handsome."

"Very," replied Maud.

"What I call diabolically handsome," added Sir Guy.

Maud laughed—"I'm afraid I can't contradict you with any truth; the expression of both eyes and mouth is so unpleasant."

"I believe she had a tremendous temper. But, after all, Isabel is very like her."

"So she is. But she has not that expression."

"Not generally; but you will catch it sometimes, when you have known her longer. Isabel is not possessed of a much happier temper than I am, Miss Vernon."

"I'm afraid not, but it is certainly not quite so explosive."

"No," replied Sir Guy gravely, "but it smoulders. Now I think you have seen all the pictures, shall we go?"

They turned back towards the door, and as they passed Lady Clara's picture, Sir Guy paused again, and the same quiet sad look came stealing over his face. Then turning to Maud he said—

"Will you come and see my mother's rooms, Miss Vernon?"

Maud hesitated a moment. "Is it not painful to you?" she asked.

"No, no; not with you. You understand," he replied, quickly.

"Then I should like it very much."

"Wait a moment and I will bring the keys," he said, and left her in the gallery. Maud stood looking alternately at the portraits of Lady Clara, and her mother, and wondering as Sir Guy had wondered, how Lady Bellingham could ever have had such a daughter, and with an uneasy feeling which she could hardly define about both. It was no wonder she had thought Sir Guy and Mrs. Darryll unlike the Riverses; it was evident they had both taken entirely after their mother's family. She was just looking at the portrait of Sir Rupert Rivers again, and thinking it was much to be regretted there was not more of his firmness and determination about them both, when Sir Guy returned with the keys.

"I have taken to keeping these keys myself of late," he said, as they walked down the gallery.

"Do you not think them safe in any other hands?" Maud asked, not considering it necessary to inform Sir Guy that she was already aware of the fact.

"I don't know about safe; but you know, Miss Vernon, my ideas on the subject of my mother's rooms don't find favour in the eyes of my fair sister. She is pleased to treat them as romantic folly; and, the last time she was here, she chose to get the keys from the housekeeper, and go and make arrangements about possible alterations there, and about having the rooms done up again, so I have taken the precaution to have them in my own dressing-room now. I suppose you have discovered, by this time, that 'I' is the test by which Isabel measures everything."

He spoke bitterly, and Maud wisely forbore to chide. She saw he felt his sister's habit of trampling over his feelings about his mother more deeply than she had imagined he did.

"This is the door," Sir Guy said, opening the door of one of the rooms Mrs. Darryll had pointed out to Maud, and standing back to allow her to pass.

Maud entered. They were, indeed, as Mrs. Darryll had said, the best rooms in the house. Old fashioned in all their arrangements now, but plainly showing the care which Sir Rupert Rivers had bestowed on everything that concerned the comfort of his beautiful wife. Every

luxury that love could dream of, or wealth provide, was there. Not a thing had been touched for four-and-twenty years, and dust lay thick on everything.

Maud stood silent, and so did Sir Guy for some time. At last he drew a deep breath, almost a sob, and said—

"I am glad I have broken the spell at last."

"What spell?" she asked, in some surprise.

"Since my mother's death, Miss Vernon, except Isabel, our old nurse, and myself, not a soul has ever entered these rooms, and I wanted to break the spell. You will think me mad, but I can't help it, the association was so strong. The past has always seemed the present to me when here. Now I think I shall really be able to realize that it is the past."

"It is better you should. Your feelings are very natural; but they require to be kept in check."

She turned to leave the room as she spoke; but Sir Guy stopped her to look at first one thing, and then another, until the dressing-bell rang.

Maud paused as they came out into the corridor, saying—

"I am not quite sure where I am. Which is the way to my room?"

Sir Guy stood looking at her, as if he had not heard what she said, for a moment, and then suddenly asked—

"Miss Vernon, do you know why I have taken you to those rooms and the picture gallery this afternoon?"

"No," she answered.

He was silent for a moment. "Not now," he said at last, in a low tone; "perhaps some day I may tell you."

He took her hand as he spoke, and gently and gravely pressed it to his lips; then hastily adding: "That passage will lead you to the part of the house you know," he turned on his heel, and was gone before Maud could recover from her astonishment.

If Doctor Marsh could but have asked, and obtained from Maud herself, the promise he had received from the dean, he might probably have heard something very shortly. She began rather to wish herself back at the deanery again.

She was nearly the last to enter the drawing-room, Sir Guy was talking to the dean, and did not seem to notice her as she came in; but

Maud almost started as she caught sight of Mrs. Darryll. Sir Guy's prophecy came back to her mind. She had never seen the likeness to Lady Bellingham so strong.

"Is that you, Maud?" she said. "I was just beginning to wonder if your mad sketching excursion had ended as disastrously for yourself as for Miss Feversham."

"What do you mean?" Maud asked, in astonishment.

"Simply that your mad scheme has sent Miss Feversham to bed with a chill, instead of coming down to dinner."

"Nay," interposed Mrs. Feversham, "you have no business to call it Miss Vernon's scheme. It was quite as much Margaret's as Miss Vernon's, and, most certainly, if she chose to stay sketching until she caught cold, it was entirely her own fault."

"Oh, well, I don't know, I'm sure. I understood that Maud had proposed it; but I only heard of it, quite accidentally, at luncheon. I thought it very foolish then; but of course it was no business of mine, so I made no remark. I had not been told anything about it."

Maud's colour rose slightly, but she made no answer, and turning to Mrs. Feversham, said—

"I hope Miss Feversham is not really ill."

"Oh, dear, no. Don't be in the least uneasy. She only felt rather chilled, and she is so liable to severe colds that I insisted on her going to bed, but really only as a precaution. If she caught a bad cold at this time of year she would be very likely to keep it the whole winter."

The evening passed but heavily. Maud was silent and thoughtful. Mrs. Darryll's equanimity was evidently much disturbed by something. She was at the piano when the gentlemen came in, and Sir Guy came up behind Maud, who was sitting turning over the leaves of a book.

"How interesting you must find that book," he said.

Maud looked at it and laughed, with some little confusion. It was upside down.

"What do you think about the likeness now?" he asked.

"What can be the matter?" Maud replied.

"Do you mean you don't know?"

"I have not the slightest idea."

"Why, you went out sketching with Miss Feversham."

"Oh, Sir Guy!" Maud said, in a startled tone, "it can't be that."

"You may depend it is. Now take my advice, Miss Vernon. I know her pretty well. Go to her dressing-room to-night, and pitch into her well."

Maud rather thought the advice was good upon the whole, and as soon as they separated for the night she went to Mrs. Darryll's dressing-room, and, in the spirit at least, if not in the letter, obeyed Sir Guy's injunctions. Mrs. Darryll confessed she had been very miserable all the afternoon.

"It is utter misery to me, Maud, to feel irritated with you; but I could not keep from wondering all the afternoon why you should have arranged to go sketching with Miss Feversham without telling me anything about it."

"And miserable you must be, Isabel," Maud answered, "as long as you give way to these ridiculous and groundless fancies. You must see that jealousy is at the bottom of all this."

"It won't happen again. Indeed, dear Maud, I could never doubt you again, after the kind way you have treated me to-night. You have proved what a true friend you are to me, and how sincere your affection must be, by speaking so plainly to me to-night. If you had not cared

very much for me you would never have taken so much trouble for me. You see, Maud, I can reason rightly."

Maud did not care to discuss that point, but went off to her room, by no means so sanguine as to the future as Mrs. Darryll seemed to be.

The following morning brought Mrs. Wellwood and Pauline Lisle to Riverston Hall. The good old lady with a thousand apologies for not having called sooner on Mrs. Darryll.

"It is all Pauline's fault," she said. "I really had a bad cold some time since; but since she has been with me she has been tyrannizing over me most dreadfully."

"And am I not quite right, Mrs. Darryll," exclaimed Pauline, "not to let Aunt Wellwood run any foolish risks?"

"Quite, dear Pauline."

"Then you shall give her a reward, I declare," said old Mrs. Wellwood.

"In what shape?"

"Let her go to the picture gallery and see it, while I talk to you. She is so fond of pictures."

"Oh, Aunt Wellwood, some other time," Pauline remonstrated.

"No time like the present, my dear. I'm sure Mrs. Darryll won't mind."

"Not the least, dear Pauline. I will take you up in a moment, and leave you there to solace yourself with art, if you don't mind being left alone."

"Shall I go up with Miss Lisle, Isabel?" said Maud.

"Ah, yes, do Maud, that will do charmingly; and you can come back to us here, when you have done the gallery."

When they did come down again they found Mrs. Wellwood in a very evident state of high satisfaction, just settling some arrangements or other with Mrs. Darryll.

"Thank you," she said, as they came in, "it is so kind of you. That will be charming; just what I could wish."

"My dear Maud!" Mrs. Darryll exclaimed, the moment they were gone, "Are you really coming round, about Pauline Lisle?"

"I havn't seen anything to make me feel inclined to change my opinion yet."

"Then to what was your wondrous fit of amiability owing this morning?"

"What fit of amiability?"

"Why, offering to go with her to the picture gallery."

"I call that civility, not amiability; and

surely you don't think I should carry my prejudices so far as that."

"Well, I'm sure, I don't know. I only know if I don't like any one I can't make up my mind to be even decently civil."

"I can't say it was a very pleasant task, certainly," Maud said. "I never saw Miss Lisle so little at her ease. I am quite sure our feelings are reciprocal."

Mrs. Wellwood in the mean time was recounting, with great delight, to Pauline the success of her negotiations.

"You see, my dear, I was determined you should go to the ball next week; and now I have managed it all so nicely. Mrs. Darryll is quite as anxious you should be there as I am, and was quite ready to help me."

"Oh, auntie dear, I wish you hadn't done anything of the kind. If I had had the least idea you intended anything of the sort, I would not have left you alone for a moment."

"But it's all settled now, dear, so nicely."

"I don't see how it can be."

"Oh, but it is. I just told Mrs. Darryll the difficulty, and how anxious I was you should go, and I asked her to send a card over to Harry; and I'm going to write and tell him he must

come, and we will find him a bed for the night. Then you are to dine at the ball, and Mrs. Darryll will consider you under her charge, and your coming home at night with Frank won't matter, as your brother will be there too."

"How much trouble you have taken about me, auntie; it is much more than I deserve."

"No, indeed it is not, my love. I have no idea of your being shut up with two old people like us, and having no amusement."

"Well, I won't deny that I should like to go to the ball, if it can be managed without much difficulty."

"Of course you would, it will be a most splendid one, I should think, by all Mrs. Darryll told me. All the county are to be there. But Pauline, my dear, you said you hadn't a dress with you."

"No, I hav'nt. I never dreamed of going to the ball, so I didn't bring one."

"What will you do, my dear!"

Pauline thought a moment, and then said, "I will write a line to mamma this afternoon, she will manage it for me."

Yes, but, my dear, do you think your mamma will do it well? You know you have so much better taste in dress than she has, from being so

much in Paris, I suppose. Do you think she is sure to choose a becoming one for you? I should like you to look very nice, you know."

"Oh yes, I can make it quite safe," Pauline replied; "not that I think it matters much what I wear."

"But indeed I think it does," replied Mrs. Wellwood; she did not add as openly as Mrs. Lisle had done, 'you are very beautiful,' but she thought it, and was most anxious her niece should appear to the utmost advantage. She would like, she thought, that Frank should see how lovely she looked at night, when she was well dressed, and got a little more colour than she usually had.

"Now, my dear," she said, the moment luncheon was over, "go and write that note to your mother before you do anything else; and don't seal it, for I want to put a few lines into it."

In a short time she followed Pauline to the drawing-room. "What, finished your note already, my dear?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, auntie, why not?"

"I thought you would have to write a much longer description of all you would want."

"Oh no. A very few lines are enough."

Mrs. Wellwood was evidently not satisfied. She was in a terrible fidget about this ball, and sat down to write a long account to Mrs. Lisle about it, with many injunctions to be sure and send Pauline a dress becoming the occasion.

Labour lost. She little knew Pauline, when she supposed she would leave any matters connected with her dress to her mother's care. Her note was only a request that Mrs. Lisle would send her a box she would find in her room, and of which she had the key with her. Her brother could bring it over the day of the ball, that would be time enough, she said.

Pauline sauntered down the garden with her book, but in reality in search of an opportunity for a little quiet reflection. She was not, however, allowed to enjoy it long. In a very short time Frank Wellwood joined her, and stretched himself on his back on the lawn beside her.

"I say, Pauline, what is our respected aunt in such a fidget about? She seems tremendously full of something very important."

"It's all about this ball next week."

"But you are not going, are you?"

"Yes, I am."

"I thought you told me you were not."

"So I did, but Aunt Wellwood has settled it

all with Mrs. Darryll to-day, and made arrangements for my going."

"I'm awfully glad to hear it," said Frank.

"Are you. Why?"

"Because I must have gone, anyway, and I hate a ball where I don't know any one."

"Poor, dear, shy little creature," said Pauline, in the bantering tone she was in the habit of using when talking to Frank Wellwood, and which slightly piqued him.

"Well, it is awfully stupid work. There's no being shy about it. But if you don't know any one you're sure to have all the stupid girls and bad dancers in the room put off upon you."

"I suppose there is some truth in that, and I'll tell you what, Frank, I'll promise to dance with you as many times as ever you like. You know I can dance; and the oftener the better pleased I shall be."

"By Jove! that's worth hearing," exclaimed Frank, starting up.

Pauline looked at him with well-feigned astonishment, and then went off into a fit of laughter.

"My dear Frank! you are very easily complimented, but, I'm sorry to say, I was not at the moment thinking about you personally at all."

"Then what on earth were you thinking of?" asked Frank, a little sulkily.

"Is it possible," she asked, more gravely, "that you do not see the cause of my wish to go to Riverston Hall as little as possible?"

"No, upon my word I don't."

"What a simple piece of honesty you are. Did it never strike you to reflect that Sir Guy Rivers is the best match in this county, or in many others round, for the matter of that? And do you suppose that there is a single mother within fifty miles who is not on the look out, and that, therefore, I should escape their tongues if I was much there?"

"I don't see what great harm that would do you, after all."

"Perhaps not, if that was all; but remember how Sir Guy must be in the habit of being run after, and I could not stand his thinking anything of the kind. I was horribly put out, at first, when Aunt Wellwood told me how she had settled it all with Mrs. Darryll, but I think Sir Guy knows her well enough to acquit her of any such ideas, and I am sure Mrs. Darryll knows me well enough not to suspect me. However, for that very reason, as I said, the oftener I dance with you, the better pleased I shall be."

"Very complimentary to me," retorted Frank.

"That's just the use of a man who is one's brother, without being one's brother, don't you see? I couldn't dance with Harry, it would look so absurd. But it will be all right with you."

"Why don't you go in for Sir Guy Rivers, Pauline?" asked Frank, looking up at her.

"I, Frank?" and there was a scornful light in her eyes. "I can't say I thank you for the suggestion. I don't know why you should suppose I am very likely to go in, as you elegantly term it, for any man."

"Now don't turn fierce, Pauline. You know I was only joking."

"I don't like such jokes; and certainly don't think I should envy any woman who married Sir Guy Rivers."

"Why not? Didn't you say, just now, he was the best match in the county?"

"Yes, in the usual sense of the word. Sir Guy is the richest man, by far, anywhere about here, and of the oldest family I daresay, but that is not my sole idea of a good match."

"What is, then?"

"A man whom I could really love," she answered, very gravely, almost sadly.

"Bless me, Pauline, you are very far behind the nineteenth century."

"I dare say I am, but I cannot help that. If ever I married it would be because I cared for a man, and nothing else. I can't see how untold wealth could make up to one for being tied for life to a man one didn't care about."

"Ah! wait a while till we see you have to choose between some awfully jolly fellow without much money, and some crusty brute of a millionaire; and then we shall see."

"Yes, you will, Frank," she answered, looking at him, with a serious calm look in her eyes. "When that comes to pass, you will see me fearlessly choose the man I care for most, without a moment's thought as to whether he is the rich or the poor one; or without the slightest regard to what any one on earth may say about me."

She got up as she spoke and went towards the house. Frank's eyes followed her as she went, but he did not move, and for long after he sat where she had left him. He was quite aware of the fact, that he was very much in love with Pauline, and that, consequently, he by no means relished her constant recurrence to the nominal relationship between them. But dare

he hope to win her? She was very young, and very beautiful, and might surely command a better match than he could ever hope to be. But yet, a girl who could express such feelings as she had just announced so fearlessly, would surely be able to appreciate and value a true, honest, manly love, such as he would give her. Had she not distinctly declared that she would not envy any woman who became the wife of Sir Guy Rivers, a marriage which most people would consider a most brilliant one? Certainly Frank Wellwood thought, as he sat on the lawn, that short conversation with Pauline had been very encouraging.

Alas! for poor Frank Wellwood. Nature had but half befriended him. She had given him an honest upright disposition, and a great deal of manly straightforward truthfulness; but had not, with these qualities, added a sufficient amount of clear-sighted discernment of character to be their safeguard in the battle of life.

CHAPTER II.

SUSPICION BECOMES CERTAINTY.

"MAUD, will you ride this afternoon?" Mrs. Darryll asked one morning, a day or two before the ball. "I am sick of ball room decorations, and all this fuss, and I want a quiet chat with you."

"Yes, I'll go willingly. But will no one else go, too?"

"No, they're all engaged; so I'll order the horses at half-past two, and then we shall have a good long afternoon's ride."

Not quite the source of pleasure that, to Maud, that it seemed to be to Mrs. Darryll. The time she had spent at Riverston had opened her eyes to a considerable extent with respect to Isabel, and confirmed sundry suspicions which she had from the first moment of their acquaintance had respecting her. Still she had borne Doctor

Marsh's words in mind constantly, and steadily striven to hold over her the influence which Mrs. Darryll's enthusiastic but somewhat stormy devotion gave her. She had reasoned or laughed her out of more than one absurd fancy or fit of temper, since her indignation had burned so fiercely over Maud's and Miss Feversham's sketching arrangement. But Maud began to find that what was not a very severe tax on her, when she was at the deanery, and Isabel at the priory, became rather a heavy one when they were in the same house. There was no repose even in her friendship, it was just as restless as everything else about her, and seemed in constant need of stimulant to keep it going. If she was not a prey to jealous fears, she was to a despondent consciousness how inferior she was to Maud, and how impossible it was that any one possessed of all the virtues, real or imaginary, with which she had endowed her, could ever feel for any one with so many faults and failings as herself, half the affection she felt for one so immeasurably her superior. She was sure, when Maud came to know her better, she would be terribly disappointed in her; and that, then, her affection for her must cool, even though she might try to hide it; and she was

constantly on the watch for symptoms of its wane.

Occasionally Isabel took it into her head to do a little self-examination, and then it was worse; for when she reviewed the manner in which she had treated Maud, and the unreasonable jealousy she had shown, she became more convinced than ever that Maud could not really love her, or believe how deep and sincere her own affection for her really was at heart. Maud found, too, that she had generally hardly succeeded in reasoning away one cloud before another was beginning to form. It was a good deal to learn in so short a time, but then one does learn a great deal even in a few days spent in the same house with any one; and a very short time with a devoted friend, such as Mrs. Darryll, teaches a lesson which the learner is not likely soon to forget.

All this, with some other suspicions which had begun to dawn upon Maud's mind, made her rather hail with satisfaction the prospect of a speedy termination to their visit. She could get on with Isabel much better at home; even though she rather began to doubt the possibility of putting Doctor Marsh's prescription in practice, of getting her to occupy herself in any way

that would prevent her thoughts centering so entirely on herself.

Mrs. Darryll had made one or two attempts to persuade Maud to extend the term of her visit, but this she had steadily resisted.

As they rode through the park, Mrs. Darryll brought up the subject again—

"Are you really determined to go next Monday, Maud?"

"Quite," she answered.

"I wish you would stay a little longer."

"We have been here quite long enough, Isabel."

"No; but if you would only stay another week," pleaded Mrs. Darryll, "I shouldn't care, because then I could get home within a few days after; but I must stay over next week, because there are a heap of people coming, just for passing visits."

Maud was inexorable. "After all I have said to you, I am not going to help you on with that idea that you cannot exist without me. It really is too ridiculous."

Mrs. Darryll protested and entreated, but in vain. Maud was not to be moved from her determination.

"Well, I know the house won't be tolerable

after you are gone. It wasn't merely because I wanted to be with you myself, that I wanted you so much to stay on. It was quite as much for the sake of the spell you cast over some one else."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean over Guy."

"Nonsense, Isabel! How can you talk in so ridiculous a way?" exclaimed Maud; but her colour rose a little at the same time.

"You may call it nonsense, if you choose, but it is a fact all the same, that since you have been here Guy has not been like himself. He is as different as possible from anything I have ever seen him before."

"A very natural result of having a large party here to entertain; and the absurdity of your idea is most clearly shewn, by the fact of how remarkably little I have seen of Sir Guy since I have been here."

"That may be; but, all the same, you have cast some kind of spell over him. He is so quiet, not half so excitable and hot-tempered as he generally is." And then, having discussed her brother for five minutes, Mrs. Darryll came back again, this time rather to Maud's relief, to the all-absorbing subject of herself and her own feelings.

They had left the public road, and had been for some time riding through lanes and fields; when, suddenly, Mrs. Darryll stopped short in the middle of an animated description of some strongly personal subject, and exclaimed—

"Why, I declare, I am passing the very place I brought you all this way to see. Look, Maud," she added, pointing with her whip to a hedge on their left hand; that's Hardcastle's leap, the place where mamma was killed, you know."

Maud looked silently in the direction in which she pointed. She felt something very like disgust for the moment, at the indifferent way in which Mrs. Darryll spoke, contrasting so strongly with the intense interest with which she had been speaking the instant before.

"Is it not a dreadful place?" Mrs. Darryll asked, after a moment's silence.

"Horrible," said Maud, "I wonder you like to come here, Isabel."

"Do you? Why I declare that's just like Guy."

"Does he object to come here?"

"Object? I should think he did. Did I never tell you that that is one of Guy's idiosyncrasies? No power on earth would get him near Hardcastle's leap. He says he has some

sort of presentiment about it. It certainly is very strange, too."

"What is very strange?" Maud asked.

„ Why, I once determined I would cure him of this absurd fancy. He always declared that he should know if he was coming near it; though, I believe, he had never been within five miles of the place. I knew he had no very clear idea whereabouts it was, so I resolved to show him his folly by getting him quietly here, and then telling him afterwards he had been here. That was the first regular quarrel Guy and I ever had. I don't think he ever forgave me."

"But what did you do?"

"I asked him, one afternoon, when we were staying at Riverston, for a few days, to go and ride with me. That was before mischief had been made, and we were very good friends. I laid my plans most beautifully. I knew more of the country then than Guy did, and we started in quite another direction. Then I pretended I had lost my way, and after riding about until I thought he was thoroughly bewildered, I brought him straight down in this direction; but would you believe it, he positively did begin to get quite restless and uneasy, and at last he pulled up his horse, and said—'Isabel, I won't

go a step further. I am quite certain we are not far from Hardcastle's leap.' I tried to laugh him out of the idea, but it was no use. Just then he saw a shepherd boy coming across the field, and he called him. We were just in sight of the farmhouse over there, away the other side. Guy asked the boy whose the farmhouse was; and he knew, by his answer, it was the house to which mamma was carried. He turned as white as a sheet, and then said—'Where's Hardcastle's leap then?' The lad told him it was just over the other side of the farm. Then Guy turned upon me, and, oh, Maud! I never saw such a look on any one's face in my life. I couldn't describe it; his face was still perfectly white, but his eyes were absolutely blazing. He said—'Isabel, you did this on purpose.' I shouldn't have known his voice, if I hadn't seen him, and I was too frightened to deny it, which I had intended. He saw he was right, and I thought he was going to knock me off my horse. He sat looking at me, for a moment, without speaking; and then suddenly turned round, drove his spurs into his horse till I am sure he sprang several feet into the air, and then went off like a shot. I had to find my own way home. Guy

must have got home in an incredible short space of time, for he had been home a long time when I got in. The groom said his horse was in an awful state. Guy wouldn't come down to dinner, and I really began to think I had gone a little too far; but the next morning he appeared at breakfast, looking rather queer though."

"Did he say nothing about it?" asked Maud, who had been listening with the deepest interest to Mrs. Darryll's story.

"I should think he did. He walked up to me, and said—'Not a word about what happened yesterday; only remember, if ever you try any such a trick again, you shall never set foot within the doors of Riverston Hall afterwards.' I have never ventured, since that day, even to mention Hardcastle's leap in his presence."

"I should think not," remarked Maud, drily.

"I suppose you think I was a horrid savage?" said Isabel, laughing.

"I don't think you showed good taste, certainly."

"But it is such a ridiculous feeling, Maud. I wanted to cure him of it. Why, he is prevented constantly from going out with the hounds, for some of the best runs of the season,

because the meet is somewhere in this direction, and he is afraid they might come over this ground."

"Your attempts at a cure were not very successful, however."

"No, but I tried the best I could."

"To cure a feeling of the very nature of which you were ignorant," said Maud.

"One thing at least I do understand," Isabel continued; "and that is, that Guy has never quite forgiven me. But I do believe, Maud, you have some sort of sympathy with Guy in all these fancies."

"I have this at least, Isabel; that I have some sort of respect for feelings which I don't share, and don't understand."

"Well, I must confess I cannot help thinking there is a little bit of affectation in it all."

"No, that I am quite certain there is not. Sir Guy has not the least particle of affectation about him."

"I'm not quite sure. He has such strange fancies about all kinds of things. He believes in ghosts; and has the oddest ideas about people fascinating him, and I don't know what all. I know he used to say that some people acted like angels upon him, and some very much like the

reverse; and that he had presentiments, sometimes, the first moment he saw people, either that they would do him some good, or some harm."

"It is very strange," said Maud. "I have heard of people having these ideas before, but I never came across any one with them. I don't quite understand it."

"He doesn't favour me with these ideas now," Mrs. Darryll continued, "though I believe they are in full force. But I do believe, if you were always here, Guy would become a rational being, just like any one else. He has been so different since you have been here; for all you are so indignant with me for saying it."

"Have you never any of these same feelings, Isabel?" Maud asked.

The diversion was instantly successful. Mrs. Darryll plunged immediately into an accurate account of her own feelings, and soon forgot all about her brother.

"Only a few minutes past six!" she exclaimed, as they reached the house. "Maud, it strikes me we must have ridden at a tremendous pace some part of the way, for we have been an awful distance. Hardcastle's leap is very nearly ten miles in a direct line from here."

Sir Guy came out of the library as she spoke. "What's ten miles from here?" he asked.

"I said Maud and I had been ten miles from here," his sister replied, with rather a panic-stricken look at Maud.

"The horses do look as if you had been taking it out of them, I must say. How did Rosamond suit you, Miss Vernon?"

"Charmingly! She is delightful."

"I am glad to hear she appreciated her honours. It is the first time she has ever carried a lady."

"I'm very glad I didn't know that when we started," Maud said. "That was hardly fair of you, with such a spirited horse, Sir Guy."

"My dear Miss Vernon! you don't suppose I would run any risks, do you? I tried her myself this morning, and I knew she would go well under your hand. She is my own special riding horse," he added, "and I never allow any one else to ride her."

Their eyes met, and Maud's went down. Sir Guy walked away towards the stables.

"Come and have a stroll before you go in, Isabel," Maud said. "There is plenty of time."

"Thank you, but I am utterly done up. I

havn't been riding for so long, that I am quite tired. I shall go and rest before dinner."

Mrs. Darryll went in, and Maud sauntered slowly across the lawn, and down among the shrubberies towards the lake. Her mind was in a state of utter confusion and uncertainty; a very unusual state with her, and her thoughts were mixed up of what she had heard about Hardcastle's leap; of her own influence over Sir Guy, of which fact she was by no means so unaware as she would have liked Mrs. Darryll to suppose; and of that remark of Sir Guy's about his favourite horse, with various stray ideas suggested by these subjects, all mixed up in inextricable confusion. In fact, she was dreaming, much more than thinking, and her mind at the moment was considerably like a kaleidoscope. A sudden turn in the path brought her to a seat in a sheltered spot, and there sat Mrs. Feversham with a book.

"What a deep reverie," she said, as Maud started at seeing her. Maud sat down beside her. She liked Mrs. Feversham, and it occurred to her that from her she might gain some information on some subjects which were perplexing her.

"I was thinking about Isabel and Sir Guy, Mrs. Feversham."

"What about them?" asked Mrs. Feversham.

"They are not like other people, altogether," Maud said.

"No, indeed they are not," Mrs. Feversham answered, with something very like a sigh. "You know, their bringing up has been unfortunate; neither have ever had proper care bestowed upon them."

"Well, but I can't understand," Maud said, "the way you speak of them both."

"How do you mean?"

"You speak with a sort of tone of mysterious commiseration; and it seems to me as if every one, who knows much about them, does the same. Doctor Marsh always does, and so did Miss Dashwood when she was here and spoke to me about Isabel."

"But, my dear Miss Vernon, surely, in what you have seen of Mrs. Darryll's disposition there is enough to account for people feeling anxious about her; her temper is a most unfortunate one."

"No, but there is something more than that. It always seems to me as if you all thought some unavoidable misfortune was impending over both her and her brother."

Mrs. Feversham looked closely at Maud for a moment, and then said—

"I think we are all anxious about them both. Mrs. Darryll is, I am sure, likely to make much unhappiness for herself; and Sir Guy is in danger too; he is so terribly excitable, and so easily led, that I dread to think what might be the result if he got into bad hands. And with respect to our mysterious commiseration, as you term it, I think——" she hesitated a moment, and then said—"Do you know their early history?"

"Nothing beyond a few stray scraps that I have gathered from what Isabel has told me."

"Ah well; then you don't know how much more peculiarly unfortunate their case has been than most cases of the kind. You know about their mother's dreadful death," she said with a shudder.

"Yes, I have heard about that."

"Well, after that, Sir Rupert went abroad again, leaving the two children under the care of his sister, Mrs. Dudley. If she had lived, all would, I think, have been very different; but she died about two years afterwards, and, from that time, the two poor children were really as friendless as if they had been almost paupers."

"Why did not their father look after them?"

"I never can think Sir Rupert quite free from blame," Mrs. Feversham said; "but one must not judge him. He was a thoroughly broken-hearted man, and could not, I believe, bear to have the children with him, at least until they grew much older; so they really were left to the care of any one who would look after them, and they were just the sort of children for whom the most careful training was necessary. I cannot imagine how they have done even as well as they have; though I believe Guy did get into some terrible scrapes, both at Eaton and Oxford. Don't you think all that quite enough to account for the sort of feeling of pity we have for them?"

"Perhaps it is," said Maud, thoughtfully; "but it always seems to me as if there was something more."

"You and Mrs. Darryll seem great friends," said Mrs. Feversham.

Maud laughed. "There is a great deal that is very good about her; but you must have surely discovered that it is rather a stormy sort of friendship."

"So I fancied; and rather one-sided, is it not?"

"Did you discover that?" asked Maud, in rather a startled tone.

"Not from you. I rather divined that it must be so from what I knew, than actually saw it. No, I think you deserve great credit, for you are very patient, and forbearing, sometimes."

"It is very hard work, sometimes, Mrs. Feversham."

"It must be, I know; but she is really fond of you; more than that I might say she is devoted to you; and, indeed, your influence is of very great importance."

"Do you think so? I have sometimes fancied that, after all, I did not do her much permanent good."

"You have not been tried; you are, at present, acting as a preventive."

"How do you mean?"

Mrs. Feversham hesitated again, and then said: "I cannot feel much doubt that Mrs. Darryll's extremely jealous disposition will, some day or other, involve her in matrimonial difficulties; and it is in such a case that the chief hope would lie in your influence over her."

"A pleasant prospect for me," said Maud.

"It will be a trying task indeed; but I am sure you will not shrink from it."

"You make her over to me much as Doctor Marsh did," said Maud.

"I think we both agree very much in our opinion about her. My own impression is, that she would not have got on so well with her husband as yet, but for her devotion to you, which has drawn her thoughts in another direction. How long has she been married?"

"She was married in February; it was just the end of March they came to the priory."

"And this is October, as one begins to find out if one sits down," said Mrs. Feversham, with a shiver, as she rose. "Quite long enough to produce dangers for a jealous temperament."

"What an unhappy disposition it is."

"It is indeed."

"And is it not strange that suspicion should be so strong in her, and so entirely wanting in Sir Guy? He does not seem to have any feelings of the kind."

"No, Sir Guy is far the most hopeful subject of the two, I think," replied Mrs. Feversham. "I fear that, come what may, poor Isabel will have much to pass through; but I do think if Sir Guy only marries well, he will do well enough. I think the influence of a really sensible wife, and one whom he loved, would be quite enough

to keep him clear of the quicksands; but I think everything will depend, with him, on his marrying soon, and marrying well."

"What if he does not, or marries ill?" asked Maud.

"Then," said Mrs. Feversham, gravely, "I don't feel much doubt that he will go to ruin. The freedom of a bachelor life, or an unhappy marriage, would be equally fatal to him, I am sure."

Maud's face was hardly visible in the rapidly darkening twilight, but she made no answer, and they walked on in silence for a little. Then Mrs. Feversham spoke again—

"I feel very anxious about Sir Guy. My intimacy with his mother has always made both him and his sister objects of great interest to me; but I must confess he is my favourite, and I long to see him well married."

"Is not that a kinder wish for him, than for the wife he may choose?"

"I think that depends entirely on whom he does choose. I know him pretty well, I think, though I have not seen much of him, for he resembles his mother so closely; and I do think, that if he married a really sensible woman, and one who had great influence over him, all would

be well. I am sure he is not in the least naturally inclined to anything at all vicious, it is only that extreme excitability, which is always so dangerous to a man, which needs to be kept in check. Still, I admit it would be a serious step for any woman to take; and I should be sorry to see any one I cared for marry Sir Guy Rivers without weighing the matter seriously. But really, Miss Vernon," she added, laughing, "one might think we were a couple of anxious mammas, calculating chances, instead of only one mamma, both of whose daughters happen to be engaged."

Maud laughed herself. "We have certainly settled Sir Guy's matrimonial prospects most satisfactorily. I know Isabel is very anxious he should marry."

"I don't wonder, though I doubt if she appreciates the importance of the step to him."

They entered the house as she spoke, and separated. A few moments afterwards Mr. Feversham entered his wife's dressing-room.

"Have you done it?" he asked. "I saw you walking with Miss Vernon."

"Yes, I had a splendid opportunity, and I have said all I feel justified in saying."

"How did she take it?"

"Just in the same calm self-possessed way she takes everything. I cannot make out how much she sees. I don't think she had the least idea what was passing in my mind."

"She is just the very girl for him."

"She is, indeed," Mrs. Feversham answered. "The sort of influence she exerts, quite unconsciously, over him is wonderful. I really do believe if he was married to her all would be well."

"Would you say that, Margaret, if she was your own daughter?"

"I can hardly tell; yet really I do believe if she was, and was what she is, I should not fear. She is a very uncommon character."

Mrs. Feversham was not right, however, in her idea that Maud had no suspicion of what had been passing in her mind. Maud had divined the truth pretty clearly, and it had not by any means tended to restore her to serenity. One thing, however, was tolerably clear to her, and that was, that her own head and heart were not altogether one upon the subject which occupied her thoughts. Not a soul, however, who had seen her that evening would have suspected that she was in anywise tempest-tossed. Her outward self-possession was as undisturbed as ever.

In the course of the evening Sir Guy sauntered carelessly up to where Maud was sitting, and after a few casual remarks, quietly asked :—

"Where did you and Isabel ride to-day?"

"You should ask her, not me," Maud answered. "You know I don't know the country."

"Do you mean to say, Miss Vernon," he asked, with a slight smile, "that you cannot tell me where you went."

Maud was silent, and looked rather embarrassed.

"Ah, I see," Sir Guy said; "it is not quite fair, I admit; but I knew you could not prevaricate, even in a trifle, where most people would perhaps consider it quite justifiable. But you needn't answer the question, I know where you went. Was it accidental, or did you go on purpose?"

"Intentional on Isabel's part, I believe. I knew nothing about it."

"Did she tell you of an exploit of hers connected therewith?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What do you think of it?"

"That it was as well meant a piece of inconceivable blundering as was ever perpetrated."

"Would you have had more respect for such a feeling?"

"Most undoubtedly. Had I been Isabel I should certainly have tried to induce you to struggle against it; but I should never have dreamed of such a step as that."

"If you had been Isabel, I should have been very different from what I am," he said in a low tone. "It is very strange I cannot define my own feelings about that place. I had never been near it in my life, that I know of, and yet I was as certain that day that we were getting near it as if I had been there fifty times. I did not know, but I felt it. I am glad Isabel told you all about that."

"Why?" asked Maud.

"I like you to know my weakest points," he answered, with something in his tone which said rather more than the mere words. Then, without giving Maud time to answer, he asked—

"Do you remember what you said, when I asked you if you believed in presentiments, Miss Vernon?"

"I am not quite sure that I do."

"Well, I do, very distinctly. You said you thought they very often worked out their own fulfilment."

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"I did not remember that I had told you that; but it is certainly my opinion."

"I have often thought of your words since. Do you care to know what the presentiment is that I have about that place?"

"Do you not dislike to speak of it?"

"Not to you. You know I found out long since that you have the gift of entering into feelings which you don't share. I am haunted by a feeling, that if I ever die a violent death, that place will have some connection with it?"

"You must fight against that," Maud said, in a startled tone.

"No, don't misunderstand me. I don't say that I think I shall die a violent death; only that *if* I do, that spot will have some kind of connection—it may be only indirectly—with it. The feeling does not go farther than that."

"Then is that the reason you avoid it so carefully?"

"Not entirely. I think it would make me do so, in moments of excitement, perhaps; but there is another reason. If I think a great deal about my mother's death, I always dream I see her, lying crushed under that horrible horse. I did the other night, after showing you the picture gallery and the rooms; and I think if I ever

saw the place where she died it would strengthen the impression. That is the chief reason I never go near it. What do all these feelings show?"

"I am not very sure," Maud answered; "but I fancy the possession of a very vivid imagination, and a highly excitable nervous system."

"I suppose it must be so. I know they are an awful bore. However, I havn't felt them nearly so strong of late. I think I have been an improving character ever since I first visited the deanery. I used to have a sort of idea that I should not live long, and that I should die a violent death; but I am beginning to get over that a good deal."

Maud by no means liked the tone the conversation was assuming, and answered lightly—

"I shall not let you talk about them then, I am sure it would be better for you to discuss some other subjects."

"No, it wouldn't, but it is horribly egotistical, I know; but I can't help that. You see, if you will have that indefinable something about you, which invites confidence, you must pay the penalty, by submitting to be bored."

"What on earth are you and Guy discussing

in such a mysterious way?" Mrs. Darryll exclaimed, coming up at the moment.

"Not you, my dear," Sir Guy answered; "so you need not alarm yourself."

"I never supposed you were," she answered, rather sharply.

"We were discussing bores," he continued. "Miss Vernon has just been hinting, in a most delicate and considerate manner, I must allow, that I am one."

"How can you say such a thing?" Maud exclaimed, laughing.

"I don't say you said it; but of course I couldn't doubt what the hidden meaning of your words was. It was quite unmistakable, I can assure you; but I'm not in the least offended, pray don't think I am. I admit the truth of the accusation."

He walked away as he spoke. Mrs. Darryll was looking very like her grandmother's portrait now.

"Now, Maud!" she said, "that is too bad. You have told Guy about my stupid suspicions at the deanery that night."

"Did I not promise you I would not, Isabel?"

"Yes."

"Then I have nothing further to say on the

subject," Maud replied, with a slight shade of hauteur in her tone.

"But, then, what did Guy mean by what he said? It was quite clear he meant some allusion to me."

"I am not Sir Guy Rivers' keeper. You had better ask him what he meant, if you want to know. You seem as good at detecting a hidden meaning as himself."

It was the nearest approach to a sarcasm Mrs. Darryll had ever heard from Maud, and she winced under it.

"Now Maud, you are getting angry. I wish you wouldn't speak in that way."

"Then don't let me see, Isabel, that you consider my promises mere waste paper."

"No; but really, it did look odd. Here have you two been sitting talking most earnestly, for ever so long; and Guy with that sort of manner he never has except when he is very much in earnest; and the moment I come near, you stop, and Guy directly says you were not talking about me. It was enough to make any one suspect you had told him what had passed."

"Don't you think it would be more likely to make any one suspect, that Sir Guy Rivers had some idea of his sister's tendencies?"

"No, indeed, Guy has no reason to accuse me of being suspicious. I only wish I had as little reason to accuse him of being so ready to listen to what other people said."

"Well, if it is any consolation to you, I can tell you, that Sir Guy very rarely speaks of you at all."

"I don't care a bit what he says or does, Maud; what I cannot bear is, to think that you would listen to anything that was said against me. I know you don't understand me. You never will."

Maud saw Mrs. Darryll's equanimity was disturbed by something, so changed the subject. She had had one or two discussions with her, on her total misreading of Isabel's character, according to her own estimate of the same; and was, to say the truth, rather tired of the subject.

And what, all this time, was the dean doing? and was he utterly unmindful of his promise to Dr. Marsh? Alas, he thought, when he had completed the education of his daughter, and seen practical proof of the sound judgment, and good sense she possessed, that he might rest from his labours; satisfied that she could now watch over herself, and so his vigilance had relaxed. He acted as, in fact, any man would under the cir-

cumstances. He had once or twice spoken to Maud about Sir Guy Rivers, with the idea of guarding against any danger; and was quite assured, by her calm, quiet way of speaking about him, that there was no cause for alarm; for, to say the truth, the dean had both seen and heard enough of his young host, to make him feel, much as he liked him, that he would rather not see Maud his wife. He was quite prepared to take alarm the moment he saw any cause for it; the only question being, how soon he would see that cause. Riverston Hall possessed, too, a very fine library, and this was an additional cause of false security to the dean. He spent the greater part of the day there, and really knew very little of what was going on, but then it never occurred to him to think of that. And so it seemed likely enough, he would only be aroused from his dream of safety, to find the enemy had scaled the fortress.

CHAPTER III.

THE BALL.

Mrs. Wellwood was enchanted with the results of Mrs. Lisle's labours as presented before her, in Pauline's dress, the night of the ball at Riverston Hall. It was, as Pauline's dress almost always was, peculiar, but seeming so entirely to suit her. Everything in such perfect harmony.

"I never thought, my dear," Mrs. Wellwood exclaimed, "that your mother had such exquisite taste. How charmingly she has settled everything for you."

"Mamma knows exactly what I like," Pauline replied, not thinking it by any means necessary to enlighten her aunt as to the fact, that the extent of Mrs. Lisle's labours had been limited to the sending over to Riverston that box aforesaid.

"Well, you do look beautiful, my child, and I hope you will enjoy yourself. My saying so won't make you vain, I know. You know what beauty is worth, do you not, my darling?"

"Yes, auntie, indeed I do, only too well," Pauline replied, looking very sad, and very bewitching. "But I must go down stairs now; the carriage will be here in a moment."

Pauline had no particular wish to enter into any discussions with her aunt on the subject of their respective opinions as to the worth of beauty, so she gave her a very affectionate kiss, and went down to the drawing-room; while Mrs. Wellwood went to her room to dress for dinner, mentally congratulating herself on her niece's sweet and thoroughly domestic disposition; and on the admirable wife she would make for some one; whom, however, she did not name.

Pauline had not been long in the drawing-room, before Frank came in. She was standing just under the lamp, fastening on a bracelet. Frank drew a deep breath, and stood looking at her in silence.

"Well," she said, after a moment, "if you were an affectionate brother, I think you might

compliment me on my dress, instead of standing gaping there."

"Pshaw!" said Frank, rather savagely. "Women never think of anything but their dress." He sat down at the table, as he spoke, and took up a book. Pauline looked at him for a moment steadily, but with as impassable a face as usual, and then devoted herself to her bracelet again in silence, until she succeeded in the apparently difficult task of getting it clasped. Then she came quietly round behind Frank, and dropping her beautiful arms, with careless familiarity across his shoulder, said softly—

"Frank, old fellow, what is the matter?"

She felt him tremble, as he answered rather sulkily—

"Nothing!"

"Then why are you so snappish? Are you not very glad to have such a charming sister to take care of?"

"You're not my sister, Pauline, and I do wish you would'nt always be talking about it. I hate all those sort of affected relationships; they are such utter rot. Besides, you are not under my care, you're under Harry's, or Mrs. Darryll's. I suppose that's the proper thing."

"Then you won't acknowledge me as your sister?" said Pauline. "What have I done to offend you, Frank?"

"Done to offend me! Why nothing, Pauline. I didn't mean that."

"But you are angry with me about something," and she bent closer over him.

"No, no, I'm not. I didn't mean that, Pauline. I— I— meant—"

"Never mind what you meant, if you didn't mean that you were angry with me, old fellow," she said. "Though I do torment you so, I shouldn't like to think I had really vexed you. If you didn't mean that, I don't care what you did mean; and I don't believe you know yourself."

"Don't I, though," he muttered, hoarsely, but Pauline took no notice. Her arm was off his shoulder now, and he breathed more freely. He fancied she did not know what he meant; but she did know perfectly well, though it did not by any means suit her purposes that he should tell her at that moment. Whether she chose that he should at all, would depend on what she would soon know now, she thought.

"There's the carriage," she said. "Put on my cloak for me, there's a good boy."

He wrapt the cloak round her, and carefully put her into the carriage.

"Mind," he said, "the first waltz, Pauline."

"I shan't forget," she answered, with a look that made his heart beat a little quicker. "Mind you and Harry are not late."

The carriage drove off, and Frank Wellwood turned back into the house, in by no means a tranquil frame of mind. A very different one, in fact, from that in which Pauline proceeded to Riverston Hall; calmly revolving the state of her affairs, and calculating her moves with the utmost precision and firmness. Her slight experiment on Frank Wellwood, had been very satisfactory. She might fearlessly count upon him, as a card to be played according to circumstances. If she could deal fairly and openly by him, well and good. She really liked him, and would be very glad if things so happened; but if not, she could not help it. No weakness on his account must stand in her way now.

"You must amuse yourself, Pauline, for half-an-hour, while we all dress," Mrs. Darryll said, as they left the dining-room. "I shall not be very long."

Pauline professed her perfect ability to do so, and Mrs. Darryll left her in the drawing-

room. The first person who entered was Sir Guy Rivers.

"What, all alone, Miss Lisle!" he said.

"Yes, actually. Mrs. Darryll is not come down stairs yet."

"What a bore all this kind of thing is, after all," Sir Guy said; "pleasant enough while it lasts, but the house hasn't been habitable for three days, and won't be for three days more, I expect."

"Where do you dance?" Pauline asked. "Have you a ball-room?"

"Oh, no. We always use the library for dancing. There is no ball-room, and the library is easier cleared out than any other room."

"I wonder you don't use the picture-gallery."

"It's too long and narrow; besides, its upstairs. Come and look at the library, it really makes a very good ball-room."

They crossed the hall, and entered the library. Try a waltz round it, just to see how the floor feels, Miss Lisle," Sir Guy said, carelessly passing his arm round her. Pauline drew back, and adroitly released herself.

"There will be plenty of time for that afterwards," she said coldly. "I am not fond of dancing without music."

"That's very cruel of you," he replied, "I don't feel much inclined for a ball, just now, and a good waltz would have got up my spirits. They tell me you are the best waltzer in the county. You must let me have the first."

"No, indeed," she replied; "it is already promised."

"You're not in earnest?"

"Yes, indeed I am."

"I really did not know you were so popular," he replied, in a slightly piqued tone, "or I would have secured you sooner."

"Oh, dear, I can assure you there is no popularity about it. I promised the first waltz to Frank Wellwood."

"That's an unfair advantage he has taken. You ought to throw him over."

"Indeed, I will do no such thing. There is no one I enjoy a waltz with so much; he dances splendidly."

They went back to the drawing-room, and as they crossed the hall again, Maud Vernon was just coming down stairs. She looked remarkably handsome, almost regal. Her dress suited her as well as Pauline's did her, only it had rather a less studied look about it. Sir Guy looked up at her, and an expression of unmis-

takable admiration crossed his face, which was by no means lost on Pauline.

"Why don't you engage Miss Vernon for the first waltz?" she asked, in a low tone. "I am sure she would waltz beautifully; she does everything so gracefully."

"In the first place, I don't care about it, and in the second, Miss Vernon doesn't dance," replied Sir Guy.

"You had better put the second first, I suspect," Pauline replied.

"Then you are quite wrong," was the short answer.

Mrs. Darryll soon appeared, and in a very short time the rooms began to fill. The Riverston ball had sounded quite attractive enough to draw all the county for a long distance round, in spite of dark nights and bad roads.

"I've had a hard fight to keep this waltz for you," Pauline said, as Frank came up to claim her when the waltz began.

"Why so?" he asked.

"Sir Guy wanted very much to have it."

"You are a dear, good child," he said, as they started off.

"Oh, don't flatter yourself too much. One wouldn't feel bound to one's brother under such

circumstances. I'm not sure you would have got it, old fellow, but for a little private conviction I have, that you are a better waltzer than Sir Guy."

"What a provoking little monkey you are," said Frank.

"Now, don't try to talk," she retorted; "you can't waltz at this pace and talk too, without serious detriment to your dancing."

How Frank enjoyed that waltz! He felt as if he could have gone on for ever. Pauline did dance beautifully, and more than one exclamation of admiration reached her ears as they flew round the room.

"You are to let me have the next, Miss Lisle," said Sir Guy, as they stopped. "One doesn't often see such dancing as yours, I must say."

Frank looked at him with a somewhat vindictive expression. His tone, when he spoke to Pauline Lisle, was certainly not a very desirable one.

"I'm not going to dance any more till towards the end of the evening," she said. "I will give you that waltz."

She pointed, as she spoke, to one far down the card.

"Why are you not going to dance any more?" Sir Guy asked, in some surprise.

"I mean," she answered, "not any more than I have already promised. I am down for one galop, and a stray quadrille or two; but I have no notion of making a business of pleasure, and dancing myself into a nervous fever."

To all further requests Pauline was inexorable, and sat quietly watching the gay scene, or calmly moved about from one room to another, in her own peculiar easy, independent way. She was far too wise not to be aware that, for her present purpose, looking on was more desirable than dancing.

Maud Vernon was looking on too. She never danced at all, and certainly felt in no humour for it at that moment, if she had. She was watching Sir Guy with deep interest, noticing with considerable anxiety his rapidly increasing excitement of manner. Suddenly she found Pauline Lisle standing close beside her.

"What a charming ball this is," she said.

"I suppose it is," Maud answered; "but as I don't dance, balls are never very charming to me."

"Do you really never dance?"

"No, never."

"I don't care much about it myself," Pauline said. "I like one or two good dances in the evening, but as to keeping on, as some people do, I would rather be scourged. Just look at the girl Sir Guy is waltzing with now. I declare she has danced every dance, I think, and did you ever see anything so lamentable as her appearance!"

"I should think she was nearly at the last gasp," Maud replied.

"Miss Vernon, I want to ask you a question," Pauline said, after a moment's silence.

"What is it?" Maud asked.

"I am rather in a state of consternation. Sir Guy is down on my card for a waltz presently, and I don't quite know what to do."

"Why?"

"Well, the fact is," Pauline said, in a hesitating tone, "Mr. Wellwood has been trying to persuade me to get out of it. He says he doesn't think Sir Guy is quite himself. Do you think it can be so, Miss Vernon? He does look rather strange, certainly, but I can hardly believe it, and I thought you, knowing him so much better, would be able to judge better than I can."

She was watching Maud narrowly as she spoke, but not the faintest trace of emotion could

she perceive. Maud was more than a match for her, at least.

"Am I to understand," she replied calmly, "that you fear Sir Guy Rivers is not quite sober?"

"Yes, that was what Frank feared."

"If you will wait a moment, until he stops dancing, I think I can answer your question without a moment's hesitation. Ah, there they come."

Sir Guy and his partner stopped near them at the moment. He was laughing and talking loudly. Maud looked at him steadily for a few moments, and Pauline as steadily at her; but not even a quiver of the down edging on her fan could she detect.

"I don't think you need be in the least uneasy on the subject, Miss Lisle," Maud said, haughtily. "I am convinced Mr. Wellwood is quite wrong. Sir Guy Rivers is extremely excitable, and that often misleads people who are inclined to be uncharitable in their judgments; but I am quite convinced that is the sole cause of his manner at present."

She rose as she spoke and walked away, leaving Pauline just as much in the dark as she was before.

Her words had left a sting, however, and Maud began wearily to wish her visit to Riverston was over, and she back again at the deanery. The conservatory was empty, and looked cool and inviting, and she sat down on one of the couches there. She felt restless and uneasy, very unlike herself. If the dean could have seen her, with that anxious, troubled look on her face, he would hardly have spoken as he had just been doing to Doctor Marsh.

The visit to Riverston had been rather a source of anxiety to the good old doctor, and had induced him to show himself at the ball, a thing which, under any other circumstances, he would have never dreamed of doing. He had suddenly come across the dean just at the moment Pauline had spoken to Maud.

"Ah, Mr. Dean!" he exclaimed, "not much in your line, this kind of thing."

"No, indeed," replied the dean, rather ruefully, "I was beginning to have some idea of creeping quietly off to bed."

"Well, don't go just yet. I came over to-night on purpose to speak to you."

"Did you? what is it?"

"Is there no chance of your having to fulfil your promise, do you think?"

"What! about my child?"

"Yes."

"Not the slightest. I have not seen the least sign of anything of the kind."

"I am delighted to hear it."

"Your anxiety on the subject seems very mysterious to me," said the dean."

"And so it must continue," replied Doctor Marsh; "only I was anxious to ask you the question, because I am going away for a few weeks."

"I am quite convinced that you may make your mind quite easy," replied the dean.

"I am delighted to hear it," said Doctor Marsh again; "you go home soon, do you not?"

"In the course of a day or two."

Doctor Marsh seemed much relieved by the intelligence.

"Mr. Dean," he said, after a moment's silence, "did you ever see truth and falsehood side by side?"

"I really don't know," answered the dean.

"You may see them now, then."

The dean followed the direction of his eyes, and laughed. He was looking at Maud and Pauline as they sat side by side.

"What a consummate piece of acting that girl is," Doctor Marsh continued; "I'll be bound she's

after some mischief now. I know her look. She certainly is very beautiful. It is a thousand pities she has been brought up as she has."

"Doctor," said the dean, in a low tone, without seeming to notice his remark, "look at Sir Guy."

Doctor Marsh looked, and his face grew very grave.

"I see what you think, but I don't think so, though that is a thing I have sometimes feared for him. But it is not so now, I am sure; it is simply excitement."

"It is surely a bad sign that excitement should produce such an effect."

"It is indeed; but it is always so with him. Poor fellow! it is very unfortunate."

They stood talking on various subjects for some time, Doctor Marsh all the time watching closely both Sir Guy Rivers and his sister, until the dean declared he could stand it no longer, and should go to bed.

How long Maud had sat alone with her anxious thoughts she did not know; but at last a footstep approaching roused her, and in a moment Sir Guy himself stood before her.

"Miss Vernon," he exclaimed vehemently, "I have been hunting for you everywhere; what

have you been doing? You must come and have an ice."

"I had rather not, thank you," Maud answered.

"What is the matter?" he asked abruptly.

"Nothing is the matter."

"Yes, but it is though. I can tell that in a moment. You are bored by all this; is it not so?"

"No, not bored, but you know I don't care about this sort of thing."

"No, no, I know you don't. You are far above all this nonsense and frivolity. Don't look at me that way," he continued, catching Maud's anxious glance, "I know what you think; that it hasn't a good effect on me. You are quite right, too. I wish the whole thing was over."

He threw himself restlessly down on the couch beside her, and then said—

"Miss Vernon, I believe I am possessed."

"Sir Guy!" exclaimed Maud.

"Upon my word, I believe I am. I feel as if I could do any mad thing to-night; or even wicked thing," he added in a lower tone. "If I could only stay quietly here I should get all right in a little, I know; but I shall have to go and dance with that little witch directly. Oh, Miss Vernon! Miss Vernon! I wish——"

He stopped short. Pauline Lisle and Frank Wellwood appeared at the entrance.

"May we come in?" Pauline asked, with an arch look. "It is so hot, we are hunting for a cooler place."

"You will find it much pleasanter here," Maud said, looking at her composedly; "but don't you think you had better have a cloak on? It is rather cold for you here after dancing."

"Oh, no, I never feel cold in that way," Pauline said, seating herself beside Maud, on the couch. "How delightfully cool it is here."

"Too cool for you, I am sure, Miss Vernon," Sir Guy said, rising. "I must really insist on your coming back into the drawing-room; I cannot allow you to take cold in my house, you know. I should look upon it as a decided breach of hospitality."

He spoke with a degree of quiet firmness and decision not usual with him, and offered his arm to Maud as he did so. She rose without speaking.

"I think I am to have the honour of the next waltz with you, Miss Lisle," Sir Guy said. "Shall I find you here?"

"Very likely, I think," Pauline answered.

"I don't feel at all inclined to leave so comfortable a resting-place."

"I don't know why it is," Sir Guy said, as he and Maud entered the drawing-room, "but I cannot bear to see you and that girl side by side."

Maud made no answer. She began to find it by no means so easy to talk to Sir Guy as she used to find it. He stood beside her silent, too, except for an occasional abrupt random remark on somebody or something among the crowd around them.

He stood there until the band struck up a waltz, and then suddenly starting, he exclaimed—

"That's the waltz I engaged Miss Lisle for! I've a great mind to cut it."

"No, you must not do that," Maud said, gravely.

"Do you wish me to dance it with her, Miss Vernon?"

"I should be very sorry to see you do anything," Maud answered, "which would lead to the supposition that you had forgotten that Miss Lisle is your guest to-night."

"Very diplomatic," he said. "How I wish the whole thing was over."

Mrs. Feversham came up the moment he was gone.

"This must be rather tiresome for you, Miss Vernon," she said, sitting down beside her.

"Oh, no," Maud answered, with rather a wintry attempt at a smile.

"I am so annoyed to hear of the question Miss Lisle asked you just now," Mrs. Feversham said.

"How did you hear about it?"

"Mr. Feversham overheard it. It was a most impertinent thing to do, considering that you are Sir Guy Rivers' guest at present."

"It was certainly not in very good taste," Maud answered; "but beyond that it was no consequence."

"It was a most absurd idea, too; Mr. Feversham says so."

"So I thought."

Mrs. Feversham continued talking quietly to Maud, with rare tact contriving to do all the conversation herself, without appearing to do so, and gradually drawing her listener away from her own harassing thoughts.

Sir Guy and Pauline meanwhile were flying round the ball-room. Quietly enough they began at first, but, before long, a sort of half

fear came over Pauline. Mr. Feversham came up as they paused for a moment.

"I should think you had had enough, have you not, Miss Lisle? you look rather tired."

"Yes, I think I have."

"Oh, one more turn round," Sir Guy exclaimed; "this is such an awfully jolly waltz. Once more round the room, Miss Lisle, and then we will stop."

"Stop! stop! Rivers. You had better not," Mr. Feversham remonstrated. "Miss Lisle has had quite enough."

But without heeding him, Sir Guy passed his arm round Pauline's slight figure, and whirled her off.

"Oh please stop, Sir Guy," she remonstrated, "there is no one waltzing besides ourselves. I don't like it, please stop.

"Nonsense," he said, "all the better; we shall have the whole room to ourselves. I declare this is splendid. What a waltzer you are, to be sure."

"Sir Guy! I insist on stopping."

"Not a bit of it," he answered, with a short laugh. "It's too much to expect."

His arm tightened round her. She was helpless in his powerful grasp, and, practised dancer

as she was, could hardly keep her feet. She felt almost inclined to scream. Everything was whirling before her. Mr. Feversham hastily crossed the room, and in another moment the music stopped.

"Confound them!" exclaimed Sir Guy. "What do they mean? I—Hulloa—!"

He might well stop short; as they came to a stand, Pauline dropped with a dead weight on his arm. She had fainted.

All was instant confusion, and she was carried off. Sir Guy was in a state of utter consternation.

"How could you go on in such a way, Guy?" said Mrs. Darryll.

"In what way, Isabel?"

"Why, dancing in such a reckless way, and after Pauline had begged you to stop."

"Who says she did?"

"Mr. Feversham."

"I never heard her. I'm sure I didn't know we were doing anything out of the way."

"Well, you had drawn down the attention of the whole room. It was that made Mr. Feversham stop the music."

"Isabel! I don't believe it."

"Ask Mr. Feversham, then."

Sir Guy did so, and was horror-stricken at his answer.

"Good Heavens! What am I to say to Miss Lisle?"

"I don't think you will find it very hard to make your peace with her," he answered, with a smile. "It was lucky for you Miss Vernon was not your partner."

"Miss Vernon!" he said. "I never should have got so excited if she had been dancing with me."

"Well, I think you had better register a vow against waltzing with any one else," Mr. Feversham said.

Pauline soon appeared again, looking just pale enough to be interesting; and received Sir Guy's really sincere apologies with graceful cordiality.

"Pray don't say another word on the subject. It was entirely my own fault. I ought to have warned you before we began, that I cannot waltz for very long together. I am very apt to faint if I do; but, as you see, the results are not very terrific."

"I shall never forgive myself," Sir Guy said.

"I hope not, for I trust you will not allow

yourself to think, for a moment, there is anything to forgive."

"Well, let Captain Rivers take you down to supper now, Pauline," interposed Mrs. Darryll; "and see, Charles," she added, "that Miss Lisle makes a very good supper, in order to complete her restoration."

"Harry has ordered the carriage to be ready the moment supper is over, Pauline," Frank Wellwood said, as Pauline passed him in the hall.

In the course of another hour Pauline was on her way home to the vicarage, and, leaning back in her carriage, declared she was too tired to talk, and intended to sleep all the way. Sleep she did not, however, but think she did, a good deal. She had discovered that night one most indisputable fact, which was, that Sir Guy Rivers was deeply in love with Maud Vernon; but what Maud's feelings were towards him she could not make out. She could not pierce through Maud's calm, dignified reserve of manner to find out what lay beneath. Pauline was by no means pleased at the discovery, or rather at the state of things which she had discovered, for she was quite wise enough to know that her knowledge of the same was rather an advantage than otherwise to her. But, for the

moment, she felt rather uncertain what her own line of conduct should be. She had much food for reflection, and not only did not sleep as they drove home, but after she was in her own room, she made no attempt to go to bed for a long time, but sat gazing thoughtfully into the fire, until even the late autumn morning was beginning to dawn.

For once in their lives she and Maud Vernon were doing exactly the same thing. While Pauline Lisle was sitting lost in thought in her room, Maud Vernon was doing the same in hers; and the thoughts of both were anxious and perplexed; but there all likeness ended. Pauline, with a skill and coolness beyond her years, and which might have made an angel weep, was calmly calculating chances, and weighing the question in her mind, whether she could afford to be honest and straightforward or not. She preferred being so, certainly, when it was possible, and in this particular instance would certainly have been especially glad if she could have seen her way clearly to acting fairly, but she could not see it by any means; and by the time she got into bed, she had tolerably decidedly settled that she must give up all thoughts of it. She was sorry, but it was one of those things

which could not be helped, so there was no use her troubling herself about it. She hated unpleasant thoughts, it was much more agreeable to turn to those which were pleasant; and though there was much in what had passed that night to disturb her serenity, there were some alleviating circumstances to which it was of importance too she should turn her thoughts.

Maud, meanwhile, face to face with a great difficulty, was striving earnestly to see the truth clearly, and to act accordingly. No great difficulty that, in general, to her, but a very great one now. She felt that Sir Guy Rivers loved her; she knew that she loved him. She had felt a deep interest in him from the first moment she saw him, and had for a long time persuaded herself that still she felt *only* a deep interest in, and sincere regard for him; and that the extraordinary influence she exercised over him was nothing more than the influence of a very calm quiet disposition over a very excitable one. These delusions had not entirely perished until the day of her ride with Mrs. Darryll to Hardcastle's leap. Then she had been rather startled at the deep indignation she had felt, and with difficulty suppressed, at Mrs. Darryll's account of her conduct

towards her brother; and a trifle had torn away the veil entirely; that trifle was nothing more than Sir Guy Rivers' remark, on their return, about the horse she rode. The sudden thrill of pleasure she had felt at the meaning tone in which he had said—"You don't suppose I would run any risks, do you?" and at the further information, that he never allowed any one to ride Rosamond except himself, completed Maud's enlightenment as to her own feelings; and with it came enlightenment also as to Sir Guy's. As long as she had told herself she did not love him, she had added that he did not love her; but it was no use to do that any longer. This sudden revelation had just prepared her to fathom Mrs. Feversham's thoughts, and to feel really grateful for the kindly warning so adroitly conveyed. Now the question was, what should her decision be; for that she would have to decide before very long, she felt certain. It was no question of inclination, she would not have had to ponder long had that been all. Such a question with Maud had a deeper view. She must decide what was right, and the very consciousness how strongly feeling weighed in the one scale, made her more uncertain as to how far she dared to trust her judgment. Sir Guy certainly seemed

almost to have two distinct natures, and her influence she knew called forth all that was good in him. If she could only have felt certain that that influence would or could always be predominant, she would not have hesitated for an instant, but could she feel sure of that? Mrs. Feversham's opinion was certainly to that effect, and she was a good judge; and—then the other side of the question would start up, and she almost trembled when she thought of what he seemed sometimes; and by the time Maud was in her bed she had by no means arrived at such a conclusive view of the subject of her perplexities as Pauline Lisle had done.

"What! down already, Pauline?" Mrs. Wellwood said, as Pauline appeared, soon after breakfast was ready, the following morning. "I did not expect to see you till luncheon time."

"Oh, I never stay in bed after a ball. It is a very bad habit."

"I hope you enjoyed yourself, my dear."

"Very much indeed, thank you, auntie. It was a charming ball."

"Did you dance a great deal?"

"No, not very much. I never do. Everything in moderation, is my motto."

"A very good one. But now do tell me all about the ball."

Pauline was vigorously cross-examined on every particular by Mrs. Wellwood. In the middle of the investigation, Frank Wellwood came in.

"Hulloa, Pauline! I didn't expect to see you. Are you better this morning?"

"I'm quite well," she answered.

"What made you suppose she would not be?" asked Mrs. Wellwood.

"Why, when a girl is waltzed till she faints, one doesn't expect her to be very lively the next morning."

"Waltzed till she faints!" repeated Mrs. Wellwood, in a bewildered tone.

"It's all nonsense, auntie. I didn't mean to tell you, because I knew it would frighten you; but I did faint in the ball-room. It was horridly stupid of me, but I went on waltzing too long, and that is very apt to make me faint."

Mrs. Wellwood was in consternation, and began to talk about sending for the doctor.

"It's all very well to talk about waltzing too long," said Frank, "but I should like to know whose fault that was."

"Why, my own, of course."

"Oh! not Sir Guy Rivers' at all?"

"No, certainly not," replied Pauline.

"I think we shouldn't easily come to an agreement on that point," answered Frank. "I think I never saw such a brute in my life."

"Sir Guy Rivers a brute!" exclaimed Mrs. Wellwood, in utter dismay.

"You would have thought so if you had seen him last night," Frank said.

"No, indeed you would not, auntie. You would have only said he got rather excited. He dances beautifully too," she added, with a defiant look at Frank, "and is very agreeable."

"So it seemed," retorted Frank.

"So he is, and I don't at all regret that waltz, though it was rather too much for me at the moment."

That was quite true, and her tone implied that she meant more than the words would seem to warrant, but Frank Wellwood made no answer. He did not like to hear Pauline defending Sir Guy so warmly, so he walked off to a cigar in the garden.

"Why did you say you didn't regret that waltz, Pauline?" asked Mrs. Wellwood.

"Because I think I learned something from

it, auntie, which will perhaps be useful to me hereafter."

"Well, I shouldn't think much that was useful was to be learnt in waltzing."

"That, like everything else in the world, depends upon circumstances," was Pauline's smiling answer.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. LISLE IS RATHER ALARMED.

With many lamentations, Mrs. Darryll parted from Maud the following week, and with innumerable protestations that she should count the days now until she could get back to the priory herself. She was, she protested, so anxious to go on with all the work she had began at the Orphan School, with a great deal more of the same kind; but finally coming back to the original starting point, that she should be wretched until she saw Maud again.

"Why don't you ask Miss Lisle to come and console you?" Sir Guy asked, grimly.

"As if any one could make up to me for being parted from Maud," she said, scornfully; "and a very useful suggestion coming from you, after what you said."

"What did I say?"

"That you would not have any of the Lisles asked to stay here."

"No! did I really, Isabel? what an extremely bad temper I must have been in to be sure."

"I should think that was very likely," Mrs. Darryll answered.

"But when did I say it?" asked Sir Guy.

"The evening we were driving over to Atherley to dinner."

"Just when I was going to be their guest! How awfully reprehensible of me. Well, I have changed my mind now, I don't care about it. If you choose to ask Miss Lisle to come here for a few days, I don't mind."

"I should like it very much indeed. I do like her. She so thoroughly appreciates Maud."

"She takes precious good care to avoid being the least like her, all the same then," said Sir Guy.

"As if she ever could be the least like her!" exclaimed Mrs. Darryll, scornfully.

"No, I believe you are just right there. Sensible young woman evidently; doesn't attempt impossibilities. I must say she is very amiable. She smiled like an angel upon me when I went down there the other day."

"What! have you seen her since the ball?"

"Of course I have. Had to go down and apologise, you know, and inquire after her health after bringing her to grief in that way. I told her how you had been pitching into me, and she said it was a great shame; that it was all her own fault, and I don't know how much more, and, in fact, we swore an eternal friendship on the spot. She's awfully pretty, and beauty and amiability should always go together, I think."

Mrs. Darryll went off that very afternoon to the vicarage on her errand, but Pauline was inexorable.

"It is so very kind of you to wish it, dear Mrs. Darryll," she said, "and as far as seeing you is concerned, I should like it so much; but I think I had better not. I came over on purpose to help Aunt Wellwood, and I would rather stay on with her until I am obliged to go home."

Mrs. Darryll pleaded, but all in vain. Pauline was not to be moved from her determination. She could be very determined, in spite of her soft gentle manner, when she chose.

Mrs. Wellwood declared herself much gratified at Pauline's decision that she would stay at the vicarage.

"I don't know how I shall get on without you now, my dear, you are such a help to me. I don't think I shall be able to let you go home at all."

"I wish I could stay with you, auntie, but I must go home before very long. Mamma is beginning to complain that she is very dull."

"Then I am all the more glad you are not going to the hall, dear."

Mrs. Wellwood was not in general apt to take a selfish view of things; and Pauline knew, under ordinary circumstances, her first question would have been "Would you like to go?" She was at no loss to guess to what to attribute her aunt's anxiety that she should not pay the proposed visit.

"How soon must you go home?" asked Mrs. Wellwood.

"I am not tied to any particular day," Pauline said.

"Then do stay, dear, till Frank goes."

"I didn't come here for Frank's amusement, Aunt Wellwood," Pauline answered, with some little sharpness.

"No, no, my dear, I know that quite well; but I should like you to stay as long as you can, you know."

"Very well, I will stay. I will write and tell mamma I shall be home next week."

So Pauline stayed on at the vicarage, and now and then Sir Guy Rivers met her, or saw her about the village, but she never came near the hall, and, to say the truth, he thought very little about it. A few months since the chance of a flirtation with her in the vicarage drawing-room would have been as attractive as a candle to a moth. But his thoughts were pre-occupied now.

Her stay, however, seemed by no means to exercise a soothing influence on Frank Wellwood, whose proceedings were a source of some uneasiness to his aunt. She had quite calculated that the course of true love was going to run very smooth indeed, but it did not seem very like it. Frank was irritable and moody, not to say sulky, and all Pauline's gentle words and ways seemed only to make him worse. A not unnatural result, Mrs. Wellwood would have admitted had she been only a little more clear-sighted. For a man to be treated with sisterly familiarity and affection by a very beautiful girl sounds very pleasant, and doubtless is, in the abstract; but when that girl happens to be the object of a very different sort of feeling

on the part of the highly-favoured individual, he very soon begins to object very strongly to the sentiment. This was exactly Frank Wellwood's case. He was madly in love, and it seemed as if nothing he could say, or do, would make Pauline see it. She was always kind and gentle even when she did banter him a little, and received all his little attentions with the most charming naive simplicity; but always, at the same time, contriving to show him that she regarded him in the light of a very affectionate brother. "Confound that idea she has got into her head," he muttered sometimes. "She must be awfully stupid, or tremendously unsophisticated." Stupid, he admitted, she was not, so was obliged to take refuge in the latter hypothesis. Sometimes he made up his mind he would propose at once, and put an end to all this suspense; but then, that was not altogether a pleasant alternative. Frank had no more fancy than most men for being refused, and as long as Pauline stuck to this idea, he had very little prospect of finding out what his chances were. He thought a great deal about it, but not to much purpose; as his second thinking upset his first, and the third generally overturned both; and this happened on an

average about a dozen times a day. The result was, that the ten days which were to be the extent of both Pauline's and his own stay at Riverston, after the ball, drew to a close; and the last day arrived without his being any nearer a decision. When things, however, get very desperate, it is generally a sign that some change is impending, and so it happened in this case.

Frank was wandering about the garden in the afternoon, in about as unenviable a frame of mind as any man could be, when he saw Mrs. Wellwood going out alone. Pauline, he knew, was in the house, and hardly knowing why or what he intended, he strolled into the drawing-room. Pauline was there quietly reading, and a sort of feeling of desperation, as he thought that before twenty-four hours were over she would be gone, enabled him at last to get firm hold of a determination. He sat down on the sofa beside her.

"Are you really going to-morrow?" he asked.

"Yes, really; body, soul, and belongings."

"And heart too?" he asked.

"I'm not quite sure about that," she answered, with a half sigh.

"Pauline! what do you mean?" he said, in a startled tone.

Pauline looked at him with some surprise, and then laughed heartily—

"I declare I believe you thought I meant I had fallen in love."

"Well, didn't it sound like it?"

"I suppose it did, but I never thought of that. What I meant was simply that life here is so charming that I think I shall leave half my heart here when I go."

"I wish you 'd leave the whole of it, then," Frank exclaimed, passionately.

"Frank!" she said, starting up from her reclining position, and then she paused, and sat looking at him, with a strange variety of expressions flitting across her face.

"Ah! you understand at last, do you?" he said. "How could you be so blind as not to see before now how dearly I love you?"

She did not move, only her eyes dropped, and she sat motionless, with her hands clasped.

"Pauline, don't look like that," Frank said. "Do speak, or you will drive me mad. You don't know how I love you," he went on passionately, without giving her time to answer, "and have done from the first moment I saw you.

You've been driving me nearly mad all this time with all that confounded sisterly affection, as you call it. I know people would say that you were throwing yourself away on me, but if you really value true affection, as you say you do, you'll know you are not doing that. Dear Pauline, say I may hope."

He paused, but still she did not answer.

"Pauline," he said again, "for heaven's sake don't keep me in this state. Say you will be mine."

Slowly she raised her eyes to his face, as she answered, "What can I say?"

"Say! why, say that you love me."

"That's just what I don't know," she answered.

"Not know! don't trifle with me in that way," he said. "It is horribly cruel. You must know whether you love me or not. Don't, don't tell me you cannot," he added, in a tone which almost touched Pauline with its depth of intensity, and made her wish for the moment that she could be as true and honest as himself.

"Oh, Frank! you foolish boy," she said, "you have placed me in such a difficulty."

"Only say you love me," he repeated.

"Now, listen to me quietly, Frank," she said,

"and I will deal very plainly with you. I have no alternative but to refuse you, simply because I have not the least idea whether I could ever love you or not. I have always looked upon you as a brother, and thought of you as such, and if any one had asked me in that sense whether I loved you, I should have said, dearly; better, in fact, than my own brother, a good deal; but I never dreamed of anything else, and I havn't the least idea whether I could ever feel any deeper affection for you than I do now. So, dear old fellow, you must give this up, and think no more of me."

"Pauline," he said, rising, and standing in front of her, "will you, can you, tell me as honestly and truly as I have told you I love you, that you are quite certain you never could love me?"

"As I have said you mustn't think anything more about it, where is the use of such a question?" she asked.

"Use or no use, I mean to have an answer," he said, fiercely. "Will you say that you could never love me?"

"No," she answered, in a hardly audible tone.

"You will only say that you don't know?"

"Yes."

"Then I won't give you up—I never will—until you say you have tried, and can't love me; though heaven forbid you ever should say that. I won't hold you pledged to me in any way, beyond a pledge the next time I ask you the question to be ready with a decided answer."

"No, no," she said, "I cannot allow that; why, that is pledging you without pledging me."

"No need to talk about pledging me," he said; "that's done past all recall. All I ask of you is this,—that you will cease to think of me as a brother; that you will remember that I love you, how dearly," and his voice trembled again, "you don't know; and that the next time I come and ask you if you can love me you will be ready with a decided answer. You surely cannot refuse me that, Pauline. It isn't very much to ask in return for such a love as I bear you."

"Pauline looked up with tearful eyes. "What can I say if you insist? I cannot refuse the conditions, but I wish you would give it up at once."

"A man isn't inclined to dash all the hope

out of his life until he sees that he has no alternative."

"Well, if you will it, it must be so; but remember, Frank, I hold you bound by no promise save one."

"What is that?"

"That you will not consider yourself bound in the least to me if you change your own mind. Will you promise me that?"

"Very willingly," he said, with a sad smile, which spoke far more than the almost bitter tone of his voice.

"Well, then, so be it," Pauline said; "but, all the same, I wish it had been otherwise. However, you must remember this is your own seeking, and if the consequences are not happy ones to you, you must not blame me."

"If they are not it won't matter much to me who is to blame, or who not. Do you really mean to say you never suspected I loved you?"

"Never dreamed of such a thing, and I can hardly realise it now. I only wish I had suspected it, for then I would have been ready to give you a decided answer at once."

"How soon will you give me an answer? How soon may I come and ask you again whether you can love me? Oh, Pauline! it's

very hard to have to wait for an answer to such a question."

"I know it is, Frank; and that is just why I wanted you to give it up."

"Never," he said, firmly, "as long as I have the faintest hope to cling to. Look here, Pauline: this is October. I shall be down here again directly after Christmas. Will you promise me an answer then?"

Pauline rose, and stood for a moment before him, with her eyes cast down as if in deep thought, then suddenly raising them to his face she said—

"Yes, Frank, and I will promise you even more than that. I will promise you, if I feel I could give you such an answer as you would care to hear I will send it you even before then."

"God bless you!" he exclaimed.

"It is a great deal to promise," she said; "it seems almost as if I was stepping out of my place; but you won't think that of me, will you?"

"Think! You may be sure I shall think very little else about you but how I love you."

"But Frank ——"

"Well, but what, darling?"

"Suppose you should change your mind in the mean time? I never thought of that."

"Pauline, how can you suggest such a thing? It's clear enough you have no idea how I love you."

"I don't think I have; but, at any rate, I will trust you; and now let me go."

He took her hand, and, drawing her towards him, passed his arm round her; then, putting his hand under her chin, he very gently raised her face towards him, and looked earnestly into her eyes. Pauline's eyes sank before his steady look. He gazed at her steadily for a moment, then kissed her forehead and released her. In a moment she was gone.

Frank sat down on the couch where she had been sitting, and buried his face in his hands. He did not feel very much elated. What after all had he gained in return for the offer of a true, manly, deep affection? Nothing more than a promise of a definite answer about Christmas, which answer might possibly then only crush his hopes for ever. It didn't seem much to have gained certainly, but it was all he could get. Something about Pauline—he could hardly tell what—had left him dissatisfied too; though he told himself, over and over again,

that nothing could be more straightforward than her conduct had been. It is never a very good sign when a man keeps on assuring himself of a thing over and over again, and it did not seem to bring Frank Wellwood much consolation, to judge by the sigh he heaved when he rose. Mrs. Wellwood came in at the moment.

"Frank!" she exclaimed. "What is the matter?"

Frank told her what had passed. The good old lady was much disturbed—

"Dear! dear! I don't like that kind of thing at all. I wish she had given you a decided answer at once."

"Well, for the matter of that, she would have done if I would have taken the answer. My position is my own choosing. I have no right to grumble, and anything is better than to be told there is no hope."

Mrs. Wellwood was not satisfied. She was very much disappointed, and went off in search of Pauline. She found her in her room.

"My dear Pauline," she said, "I am so sorry."

"Has Frank told you, auntie?"

"Yes, my dear, and I am very grieved."

"Auntie dear," Pauline said, "don't scold me.

I really could not do otherwise. Frank would not take the only decided answer I could give him. I wanted him to give it up altogether."

"You may be sure he would not do that, Pauline, as long as you would not say you could not love him," replied Mrs. Wellwood, rather sharply. She was terribly disturbed by what had happened.

"Oh, don't speak in that way, auntie; please don't," pleaded Pauline. "I am very, very sorry; but Frank chose to ask questions I could not truthfully answer otherwise than I did, so what could I do?"

"No, my dear, I don't mean to say you were to blame, but I am terribly disappointed, I must allow. I thought you must have seen what Frank intended."

"I never dreamed of it till to-day; if I had I should have acted very differently."

"Pauline, my child, think well before you reject Frank. You might make many more splendid marriages,—many which the world might consider very much better,—but you will never get a better husband than Frank would make you."

"I know that quite well," Pauline said, in a sad tone.

"Then why decide as you have done?"

"Because it does not follow, of necessity, that I could love him as he deserves to be loved. One can't force that, you know, and you wouldn't wish me to marry him without, auntie, would you?"

"Heaven forbid that you should do such a thing, my child!"

"That is just what made me answer Frank as I did. I have been so accustomed to regard him as a brother, that I cannot in the least tell whether I could ever learn to look on him in any other light. The moment I feel certain on the subject, he shall have my answer, and you may be quite sure, in making up my mind, I shall not estimate Frank personally one bit below his merits. I know well enough what a noble fellow he is."

With that Mrs. Wellwood was fain to content herself, but she could only say—

"Well, my dear, I must confess I don't like it."

"No more do I, auntie; but there is no help for it."

Frank Wellwood was at the door the next day when Pauline came down to get into the carriage. He looked pale and anxious, and

after she was seated stood talking to her for a few moments, as if disinclined to let her go."

"Don't keep me any longer," she said at last, "it is no use."

She held out her hand; he grasped it firmly in his, and said in a husky tone—

"Pauline! Pauline! deal truly by me, as I have dealt by you."

He said it almost involuntarily; he hardly knew why. Perhaps it was instinct made him; at any rate he did say it, and then wondered he should have thought of saying it; was she not certain to do that?

Pauline's only answer was a silent pressure of his hand as the carriage drove off. She only wished she could. She really did like Frank as much as it was in her nature to like any one, and she felt rather sorry for him. She would have been very glad if it had been any one else with whom she had to play fast and loose, instead of him. Nay, she even went further than that; or rather, what fragments of a truer nature had survived her training carried her further, and for a few moments suggested the idea, whether it would not be better, after all, to give up the course she had marked out for herself, and resolve to be a good wife to a man who loved

her far better, she knew, than she deserved. It was but a faint struggle of nature, just enough to show that, after all, with all her faults, she was a woman, not a monster; and it was with a sigh that she shook off the sentimental nonsense, as she called it, and set herself to a rigorous investigation of the exact nature of her position at the moment.

That evening, in the drawing-room after dinner, the usual time for confidences between mother and daughter, Pauline said—

"Mamma, do you remember the last thing I told you, just before I went to Riverston?"

"Yes, my dear, quite well."

"I'm half engaged to Frank Wellwood," she answered calmly.

"Pauline! my dear child," exclaimed Mrs. Lisle, "what do you mean?"

"Just what I say, mamma."

"But, my child, how on earth can you be half engaged to a man?"

Pauline explained what had passed, her mother smiled.

"You can take care of yourself, at any rate, my dear, I see," she said.

"I don't know that," Pauline answered. "I wouldn't have answered for my not making a

fool of myself if I had stayed much longer at Riverston."

"Why, my dear child, you don't mean that you have fallen in love with Frank Wellwood?"

Pauline was silent for a moment, and then said—

"I don't know about falling in love, exactly; but I do know that I care more for Frank than I ever shall do for any one else."

"My dear Pauline! you must not get such absurd fancies into your head, it will never do. It is all very well for people who can afford it, to have feelings, but you know you must marry for a good settlement."

"I know that, mamma, and I mean to do so. You needn't be afraid. I'm not going to do the romantic. If there was any chance of that, it's over now, I think. Still, I do wish it was any one else but Frank, poor old fellow. He is such a true honest fellow. Poor Frank!"

Mrs. Lisle was panic stricken, and almost trembled, as she thought what might have been the results, if Pauline had stayed much longer at Riverston.

"Have you been over to Stowminster lately, mamma?" Pauline asked after another short silence.

"No my dear. I havn't been there since you left. Are the dean and Miss Vernon gone home yet?"

"Oh dear yes, some days since. They went almost directly after the ball. Mrs. Darryll is to go home to-morrow. She is a great fool."

"So I think, but I thought you liked her."

"She suits me, I don't know much about liking her. She is perfectly mad about Miss Vernon, and so is some one else too, for the matter of that."

"Who?" asked Mrs. Lisle.

"Sir Guy Rivers."

"Are you in earnest, Pauline?"

"Most certainly. There is not a doubt of it. He is tremendously in love, after a fashion."

"Is she?"

"That's just what I can't make out. She is so awfully impenetrable; but you may be quite sure of this, mamma, we shall very soon hear, either that Miss Vernon is engaged to Sir Guy, or that she has refused him; and, upon my word, I hardly know which to think it will be."

"I thought there was some object in their going to stay at Riverston Hall," Mrs. Lisle said, with some asperity. "You may depend upon it she won't refuse him. I thought, all

along, that wonderful affection for Mrs. Darryll wasn't all for nothing. But I really didn't think she was quite so deep as that."

Mrs. Lisle spoke with very considerable bitterness. She was much disturbed by what her daughter had just told her; far more so, seemingly, than Pauline herself.

"I am not sure, after all, that you are right," Pauline replied. "I doubt whether that has anything to do with it. I don't much think that Miss Vernon would do that kind of thing. She can afford to be disinterested, you know. That is one advantage, certainly, in being an only child. If I had been an only child——" she paused.

"What if you had been, Pauline?"

"Nothing," she answered; "only some one's heart wouldn't have been quite so heavy as it is just now, I suspect; and wouldn't have had quite so good a chance of being worse before it can be better."

Mrs. Lisle perfectly understood her daughter, and registered a mental vow that she wouldn't trust her away from home again, unless she knew perfectly well whom she would meet, at least until she felt certain there was no chance of her making a fool of herself. Then a terrible dread came suddenly across her mind, and she said—

"I hope, my dear child, you don't mean to write to Frank Wellwood."

"Why should I not, mamma?"

This was dreadful; but Mrs. Lisle had presence of mind enough to conceal what she felt, and to answer with apparent coolness—

"I don't think it would be wise, in the position in which you stand, my love. You see you cannot correspond with him as with a relation, and yet you are not engaged."

"We are half engaged," said Pauline.

"No, Pauline, I won't allow anything of the kind. You stand quite independent," said her mother, firmly—she was beginning to be very seriously alarmed—"and I really cannot allow any correspondence, it would compromise you terribly, afterwards. I must insist you don't think of anything of the kind."

"It is rather late for you to begin to take up the reins of authority again, mamma," Pauline replied, with a quiet smile; "however, you needn't distress yourself, I know quite well what I am doing, and I havn't the least intention of corresponding with Frank Wellwood. There is one thing, by the bye, that you must settle. Harry knows nothing of this, and I think he had better not, but you must guard against his

asking Frank here. He might do it, you know, and I am not sure Frank would refuse. You must see to that."

"I'll take care," her mother answered, and proceeded to fulfil her promise, by capturing her son, on the first opportunity, and confiding to him her impression, that Frank Wellwood was considerably in love with Pauline; and that, as she did not consider it at all a desirable thing to encourage, at present at least, she wished he would avoid asking Frank to Atherley, or promoting any meeting between them in any way.

"Do you mean to say he wants Pauline to marry him?" Harry asked, bluntly.

"I think that he is in love with her, most decidedly."

"Then, all I can say is," retorted Captain Lisle, "that she's a precious fool, if she doesn't take him."

"I don't at all agree with you," replied Mrs. Lisle, "and I beg you won't put any such ideas into Pauline's head. Frank Wellwood is a very nice quiet young fellow, I've no doubt, but he is not by any means a good match; and I am sure Pauline, with her beauty, may do much better."

"Aye, that's the way!" exclaimed her son, "put her up to auction, and, what's worse, teach her to put herself up to auction. Bah! what wonder there are such women in the world, as there are. Now look here, mother, once for all, I tell you, if you really have anything of a mother's feelings, you had better encourage the thing. I don't go in for respectability, and all that kind of thing, myself; and I can only say, if I ever marry, Heaven help my wife; but I do know what's worth a woman's while to marry for, and that's just what Pauline would get if she married Frank Wellwood. There isn't a finer fellow living than he is though he is a shade too respectable for me; and I'd be very glad to see Lena as safe as she would be with him."

"Stuff and nonsense, Harry!" said his mother, angrily. "I am quite capable of taking care of your sister, and I only beg you will attend to my request, and not interfere with what doesn't concern you."

"Oh confound it all, you needn't fear. I'm not going to put my foot into any of your affairs. I've only told you what you will believe some day, if you don't now. My leave's up next week, and then you'll have the game all

your own way. Only, if you're after Sir Guy Rivers, I can tell you you're sold."

"I don't know why you should think I was after any one, but I am quite sure of this, that Sir Guy Rivers was very much struck with Pauline."

"Yes, I don't doubt it, after a fashion," Harry said, with a short laugh; "but you mark my words, mother, if any girl about here becomes Lady Rivers, it will be Miss Vernon."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Well I am, that's all. At least, unless she refuses him, and I don't think she will;" and Captain Lisle having had enough of the subject, and of his mother's society, sauntered off.

And that very day Frank Wellwood had gone back to London, carrying with him, cherished in his inmost heart, with passionate devotion, the image of Pauline Lisle; but carrying with that image also a sort of restless hungry longing for he hardly knew what, and a vague sense of disappointment, which at times grew almost into a dim foreboding of evil to come, and a wish, no sooner found than repented of, that he had never seen her. He bore it for a few weeks, and then he could bear it no longer, and so he wrote to her an earnest, loving letter,

begging her to release him from his miserable state of anxiety as soon as possible, and entreating her, in the mean time, to write him a few lines sometimes. The return post brought him an answer. How his heart throbbed as he saw the well-known writing, and how it ached when he had read the letter. Short, but very kind and gentle, promising all he wished, except that she would write to him. That, she said, her mother would not hear of; and Frank, she was sure, would feel that in such a point she ought to be guided by Mrs. Lisle's wishes. Frank did not know what he had expected, but he felt miserably disappointed; and from that moment his dim forebodings for the future seemed to grow stronger than they had been before; but, with their increasing strength, the image of Pauline Lisle seemed only to grow more inexpressibly dear to him than ever.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEAN IS VERY MUCH ASTONISHED.

The dean was really beginning to feel uneasy about Maud. His alarm was first excited in the cathedral one Sunday, during service, shortly after their return from Riverston hall. One of the canons was preaching a drowsy sermon, and the dean was extremely bored thereby, even so far as to find himself becoming as drowsy as the sermon, so he roused himself and looked round him. His eyes fell suddenly on his daughter's face, and the drowsy feeling was gone in a moment, as well as all recollection of the canon, or his sermon. Maud was sitting apparently in a deep reverie, and her expression startled her father. There was an anxious harassed look upon her face, which he had never seen there before; and then his fears, once roused, grew with astonishing rapidity. She was certainly

looking worn, and rather pale, and was thinner too than she had been; surely too, her appetite had not been good of late. How was it that he had not noticed the change sooner? The dean shuddered as he remembered that Maud was within a few years of the age at which her mother had died. Anything that concerned his child touched him very closely, and by the time service was over he had very nearly, mentally at least, made all his arrangements for an immediate visit to Italy or Switzerland. He questioned Maud the moment they entered the house.

"My dear child, what is the matter? I am sure you are not well."

"Indeed I am, papa," she answered, with evident surprise, "there is nothing the matter."

"It is no use to say that Maud; you are pale, and certainly thinner than you were, and your appetite is not as good as it was."

"When did you discover that fact," she asked, with a smile.

"Never mind when," said her father, "it is quite enough that I have discovered it. I shall make arrangements for your going abroad for a few months directly."

"No, please don't do that, papa," Maud answered; "there really is no occasion, and it

would not do me the least good. I really am not ill, but I have been a little worried and perplexed lately, and I daresay that has told upon me."

"What has been worrying you, Maud? Mrs. Darryll, I suppose."

"She does cause me a good deal of trouble, I must admit."

"In what way?"

"I really could hardly say. Things that do tax one a good deal with constant repetition, seem such trifles when one comes to try and describe them, that one feels almost ashamed to admit they have worried one at all."

"I doubt Mrs. Darryll being a trifle to any one," replied the dean; "I almost wish you had never known her, the gain of the acquaintance is all hers, the loss all yours."

"Oh, I don't think you must quite say that. There are a great many redeeming points about her."

"So there are. She is clever, and, in some things, generous. But what between her egotism, her weakness, her jealousy, and her temper, she would be a thorn in the flesh to any one who had much to do with her."

Maud was rather surprised. She had not the

least idea that her father had so accurately fathomed Mrs. Darryll's disposition.

"I'm afraid there is a great deal of trouble before her," she said, "and I don't find Doctor Marsh's prescription very successful. I cannot teach her to run alone. She is always hanging on to me. Even the very things in which I have tried to make her interest herself, with the hope of providing her with some occupation for her thoughts beyond herself, she only takes up out of devotion to me. And she has, too, the most ingenious way of twisting everything the wrong way, and making herself the most important object in everything she does."

"Exactly! and the sooner you are away from it all for a little, the better," said the dean.

"No, really, I had rather not. I don't mean ——" she hesitated. She had intended to say that Mrs. Darryll was not what was making her look harassed and worn; but she knew, if she did, her father's next question would be, what was then? and how could she tell him what really were the anxious thoughts which were wearing her so much, and causing her so many sleepless nights?

"But I will have my own way in this, my

child," her father replied. "Shall it be Italy or Switzerland?"

Maud thought for a moment, and then said—"It shall be neither, papa, until Doctor Marsh comes home; you must yield so far. I really would rather not go just now, but he will be back in a few weeks, and then he shall decide whether it is desirable. If he thinks it is, I will not say another word. You know I would not deceive you, and I really do not feel in the least ill."

The dean yielded to this, and so the matter was settled. At least, so he thought, but Maud herself had a secret conviction that it would be settled in quite another way before Doctor Marsh's return. She was quite certain that before then she would have to decide the point, whether she would be Guy Rivers' wife or not; and many a long hour of anxious thought that subject had cost her. But it was decided now; and if the dean had but known it, the turning point was passed before he had discovered that there was anything amiss. Maud had striven earnestly to give the head fair play in its contest with the heart, and she believed she had decided rightly in effecting a reconciliation between them. But right or wrong, the decision was

made, and she felt more easy now than she had done for long. Such a long period of doubt and uncertainty had been a hard trial for so generally decided a character, and had very much increased the strain which Mrs. Darryll's unreasonable requirements were upon her. To be for ever obliged to hold up some one else is trial enough, when your own footing is firm; but when that seems to be giving way under you, it is a terrible strain, and so Maud had found it.

The settlement of the matter was even nearer, however, than Maud thought. The very next morning she heard a footstep crossing the hall, which she knew well enough now; and the sound of which had, for some time, made her heart beat faster. In another moment Sir Guy Rivers appeared, unannounced, as had been his habit of late. Maud felt intuitively what was coming, and in a very few minutes she was listening to his burning and passionate declaration of love, which, it needed no words to tell her, he had felt for her almost from the first moment of their acquaintance. Silently she laid her hand in his, with a sort of feeling of relief that it was decided that the die was cast; though, even at that moment the thought would intrude

itself—was it well done?—just as, nearly eight and twenty years ago, the same thought had intruded itself on a similar occasion, when Lady Clara Vere had placed her little hand in Sir Rupert Rivers'. Only that then, the doubt was on the opposite side. No vestige of doubt was there on Sir Guy Rivers' mind on the subject as he sat beside Maud and told her all the history of his love. How, from the first, she had influenced him so strangely, and how her mere presence seemed to rouse into activity all that was good in him. How his wild fancies about his mother, and dread of the spot where she had died, had seemed to grow fainter as his love for Maud grew stronger. How, from the time he had stood with her in the picture gallery, and in his mother's rooms, the gloom and horror of both to him had seemed gone; leaving only a sad but quiet memory in their place. How Riverston hall itself seemed all changed, since it had become associated with Maud; with much more to the same purpose. Maud's heart grew lighter as she listened. She felt that, conscious as she had been of her influence over him, she had not fully estimated its extent. And surely she had little cause to fear for the future now.

"Oh, Maud! Maud!" he exclaimed, "if you had rejected me——"

"What then?" she asked.

"Hopeless, utter, irremediable ruin," he answered, between his clenched teeth. "I couldn't have borne it. It would have driven me mad. I shall make something of life now, after all."

"You havn't heard what papa has to say yet," Maud answered.

"No! by Jove! the dean. That's a very serious consideration. He can look so awfully solemn, sometimes. I think I'll go and get it over now, Maud, at once."

"You'll find him in the library," Maud replied.

With considerably slower steps than he had entered, Guy departed. The dean's "come in" in answer to his knock, was not very encouraging; it spoke of a man who was very busy, and so the dean was at that moment.

"Oh, Rivers! is that you?" he said. "Do you want me particularly? I am very busy this morning."

"Yes, very particularly," replied Sir Guy, in a tone which made the dean look up, and rather startled him too.

"Well," he said, pushing aside his papers, "be as brief as you can, there's a good fellow."

"As brief as you like," Sir Guy replied, with a smile, "though I am not sure my brevity will help your business much. Will you accept me as your son-in-law, Mr. Dean?"

The dean started from his seat as if he had been shot. "You!—son-in-law!—" he gasped.

"Yes; Miss Vernon has just given me leave to ask you the question. I hope," he added, with a shade of anxiety in his tone, "you have no objection?"

The dean made no answer; he was too confused by the multitude of thoughts which came crowding into his mind, to do so. Doctor Marsh's strange request—Maud's remarks on Sir Guy—his own observations—all came back to his mind, with many other perplexing thoughts.

The bright look on Sir Guy's face faded rapidly, as he watched the dean anxiously. At last he spoke, and his voice trembled as he did so.

"Your silence is not very encouraging, Mr. Dean. I hope it does not mean——"

"It means," interrupted the dean, "that I am so taken by surprise, that I don't know what to

say. I tell you fairly, Rivers, I cannot cordially say I approve."

"Do you not consider it a fitting marriage for Miss Vernon?"

The dean smiled. "How can you ask so absurd a question? No, it is not that; but you are not quite the man I should have chosen for my child."

"If you mean that I am not worthy of her, I know that as well as you do; but where would you find a man who is? I hope I am not to understand that you refuse your consent."

"By no means. I do not mean that," replied the dean; "but I shall probably attach certain conditions to it, and what they are must depend, in some measure, on Maud herself. I must talk to her, before I can give you a more decided answer. I will not keep you long in suspense. Come back to me after dinner this evening, and then I will answer you. And now leave me. You have routed all my ideas, and I want to think."

Sir Guy obeyed, and the dean sat down again at his table, and rested his head on his hand, in deep and anxious thought. He did not like it—he could not like it—and yet, when he asked himself why, he could give no satisfactory reason.

None, at least, for feeling so strong an objection as he felt to the marriage. He could not but admit that Doctor Marsh's strange request had a great deal to do with the uneasy feeling he had about Sir Guy. What did that request mean? And why was Doctor Marsh absent at this moment? It was impossible to make such a promise a ground for refusing his consent. There was nothing against Sir Guy, beyond his extreme excitability; and that could hardly be urged as a reason for objecting to the marriage; more especially, as Sir Guy could fairly plead that he had contrived to get through nearly twenty-seven years of a bachelor's life, without having been involved in any very serious backslidings thereby. Altogether, the dean felt that he must consent; while, at the same time, that consciousness only made him feel more averse to doing so. Still, his promise to Doctor Marsh, perplexed him greatly; but at last, he suddenly determined that he would speak to Sir Guy himself on the subject, though without telling him exactly what had passed, and be guided, in some measure at least, by his answer. Whatever his intended son-in-law's faults might be, a want of honest sincerity was certainly not one of them, and upon that conviction the

dean's resolution was formed. He had just arrived at this decision, when a hand was laid on his arm. He started, for he had not heard the door open, and found Maud standing beside him. She was rather pale; but her father thought she had improved in appearance already.

"Was this what was troubling you, my child?" he asked.

"Yes, papa. I knew it was coming, and it was a hard point to decide."

"Did you not know what you felt then, Maud?"

"Only too well," she answered, "but I could not feel quite sure what was right. Have I done right, papa?"

"Do you love him very much?" the dean asked, hardly seeming to notice her question.

"Yes."

The answer was so low, it was hardly audible, and yet it told all. It is a strange little word that, with its endless shades of meaning, from the faint, shadowy "Yes," which is little more than a negative in disguise, up to that "Yes," which seems to carry with it a whole volume of affirmations, and, sometimes, the history of a lifetime as well. It was generally with Maud, as with

all decided people, strongly affirmative, but tenfold more so now.

"Then I think you have done right, Maud, but I wish, I must allow, it had not been. I would rather have seen you the wife of a less excitable, and firmer character."

"What I should have chosen," Maud replied, with a smile, "if I had been drawing an imaginary character for myself; but it is no use to think about that now, papa."

"Have you thought well of the risk, my child?" asked her father.

"Indeed, I have. I have thought long and anxiously, and I think I have decided rightly."

"There is but one condition I shall make, then," replied the dean; "and that is, that the marriage does not take place under a year from this time. You have not known Sir Guy very long, and I will have you see more of him, and on a more intimate footing than you have yet done, before you become his wife. It will be, to a certain extent, a trial of him as well; and I will have him show that he is worthy of you, before I give my consent. Do you think my decision a very hard one, Maud?"

"No, papa, you are quite right. It is well it

should be so, though I could not have had the courage to say it myself. There is a certain risk, and it is well Guy should have some sort of trial. You see," she added, smiling, "I am not quite a fool, though I am in love. If Guy stands the trial, he will gain much by it—" She paused rather abruptly.

"And if not?" said the dean.

"God will strengthen me to do what is right," Maud replied, in a low tone, firmly enough, but with a look which made her father regret he had asked the question, and pray that Guy might stand the trial.

She turned to leave the room as she spoke; but as her father watched her retreating form, Doctor Marsh's words came suddenly back to his mind, that no one would ever know what was in her, unless it was brought out by fire; and now he felt more inclined to echo the doctor's prayer, that she might not be called upon to pass through the furnace, than he had done when it had seemed so unlikely, and when he had said that the results were worth the discipline.

The dean had not been long in the library, after dinner, before Sir Guy appeared.

"Don't keep me long in suspense, now, Mr.

Dean," he said. "You don't know what the last few hours have cost me."

"Not longer than I can help," replied the dean. And then he told him how anxious he felt on the subject of his extreme excitability.

"You think it likely to lead me into dissipated habits, don't you, Mr. Dean?"

"Exactly."

"And you are quite right. It has done, to a certain extent, in time past; still, not to any great extent, and surely, therefore, now, you need not fear."

"Why, then," asked the dean, suddenly, "should Doctor Marsh be so extremely averse to the idea of a marriage between you and Maud? He knows you better than any one about here."

"Doctor Marsh averse to it!" repeated Sir Guy. "What does he know about it?"

"Nothing," replied the dean, "but he spoke to me on the subject, some time since, and said he should regret such a marriage extremely."

He watched Sir Guy's face closely, as he spoke, but the only expression there was one of utter astonishment.

"On my honour, Mr. Dean, I have not the least idea why he should object. He can know nothing to make him. I have been guilty

of many wild exploits, perhaps even worse, but, thank heaven, there is nothing in my past life I need shrink from your knowing, even at this moment, when I am asking you for your daughter. Dr. Marsh has spoken to me very seriously, more than once, about being so excitable; he evidently thinks it rather a serious evil, and I believe it is myself; but I am forewarned now, and you may depend I am forearmed. Beyond that, I know of nothing which could make him object."

"Then that is all I have to say," replied the dean, and he told Sir Guy the conditions.

Sir Guy pleaded hard for a shorter term, but the dean was firm. "I will have it so," he said, "and Maud herself admits that it is well it should be so."

Sir Guy was fain to submit, but it was with rather a bad grace—"I shall come and live at the priory, then," he said.

"You can please yourself about that," replied the dean, "I have no objection to your seeing as much of one another as you like. And now, be off to the drawing-room."

Sir Guy obeyed, and left the dean to his thoughts again. They were not very bright ones. All his care, he thought, had not availed,

to shield his daughter from a danger, which, perhaps, had her mother lived, might have been averted, and he blamed himself for his blindness, and wondered, now the light had come, how he could have been blind so long. He did not know why he had so strong an objection to the idea of the marriage. He only felt that he had it, and at that moment, had any one asked him whether he would rather, or not, that Sir Guy should stand the trial he had imposed, he would have been puzzled to answer. When he thought of the look his question had called into his child's face, he prayed he might; but when he thought of Sir Guy himself, he could almost have wished he might not. And so he halted between two opinions, and seemed likely enough to continue to do so, until the future, by becoming past, should have decided the point for him.

With more than usual tenderness he kissed Maud, as he wished her good-night, that evening—

"Do you dislike it so very much, papa?" she asked, in a low tone. "You have been looking so grave, this evening?"

"I am very anxious, my darling," he replied.

"I hope and trust you need not be," she answered. "I did not know myself, until to-night, what a hold I have upon him; but," she added, looking up into her father's face, with an earnest, steady look, "remember, papa, you shall decide, at the end of the year, not I. If you are not satisfied, I will not be Guy's wife. You know what it would cost me, and you won't ask me to give it up without good cause; but I could not marry without your sanction. Not that I think, however, there will be any cause for doubt."

Her words meant more than her father understood. There would be, she felt certain, no cause for doubt. Either all would go well or so ill, that there would be absolute certainty, one way or the other. Maud slept better that night than she had done for very long, but little sleep had the dean. The shifting wheel of fortune had laid the anxieties and perplexities on his shoulders now.

Mrs. Darryll was down at the deanery almost before breakfast was over the next morning, in a wild state of enthusiastic delight.

"My darling Maud!" she exclaimed, almost stifling her in her embrace, "what can I say? I am too delighted to speak."

"Then you had better calm down again before you try," Maud said, laughing.

"Oh, Maud! it is too delightful. I shall be so happy now. I shall never be one bit jealous any more. As you have no sister of your own, I shall feel that no one has a right to a nearer place than me."

"No one?" said Maud.

"You know what I mean. You can't be so absurd as to suppose I don't make an exception in favour of Guy. You don't suppose I should ever be jealous of him. Why, you will love me all the better because I am his sister."

"I am not quite certain about your not feeling jealous of him, if you don't mind."

"How ridiculous," exclaimed Mrs. Darryll; "but that is always the way. You have once settled it that I am jealous, and you never will believe that I can overcome the tendency."

"I cannot say what I don't think," Maud answered, gently.

"Well, well, I'm too happy to talk about it now. It is so delightful. Fancy you reigning at Riverston. I shall begin quite to love the place now. And we shall always be near each other. Oh, Maud! how much I have to be thankful for. Is it true that the dean insists

the engagement shall not be spoken of at present?"

"Yes," replied Maud. "Papa does not wish anything should be said about it. I suppose it will soon creep out, but I think it is just as well nothing should be known at present."

Mrs. Darryll rather reluctantly acquiesced. She was in such a state of excitement about it, she would have fain proclaimed the news from the cathedral tower if she could.

"I say, Maud," she suddenly exclaimed, "what a deal of propriety I shall have to do now. I shall have to go to the wall with a vengeance. I declare I think I shall have to do the affectionate, and drag Edgar about too in order to keep me company."

She rattled on, till Maud was fairly tired, and almost glad when, at last, she took her departure. She had never seen her in such spirits before. Yet, even then, her brother and Maud seemed hardly so much first in her thoughts as the feeling that she would herself have now a greater claim on Maud than any one else.

What should he say to Doctor Marsh? This was the thought most constantly in the dean's mind. How account to him for the non-fulfilment of his promise? At first he had resolved

he would wait until the doctor returned home, and then tell him all that had happened, and how completely he had been taken by surprise himself. But then it occurred to him, that rumours might possibly get abroad on the subject, and might even reach his friend's ears, before he came back to Stowminster, which he was not expected to do for some few weeks yet. The thought of appearing for a moment to have forgotten such a promise was insupportable to the dean, so he resolved to write to Doctor Marsh, and explain all that had happened. This plan had another advantage as well. It would give Doctor Marsh time to consider whether or not he would now say what had induced him to ask for the promise. Accordingly the dean wrote a very few days after he had given his somewhat reluctant consent to the marriage; told Doctor Marsh all that had happened, with many lamentations over his own short-sightedness; and begged him to believe how entirely unintentional his failure to keep his promise had been. "I am afraid," he wrote, "these are matters in which we men are terribly stupid. I daresay a woman's quick eye would have read the truth long before; and I must say I rather tremble to think how much the

want of a mother's care may cost my child; I can't like it, and yet I cannot find sufficient reason for disliking it as much as I do. I think you are in some measure responsible; but I think, also, you will see I could not act otherwise than I have done. Sir Guy was so perfectly straightforward. Now, with regard to your intended communication. You must judge whether to make it or not; but I think you will see that unless it is one which you think would cause me to withdraw my sanction, it is one which had better not be made now, and that I can hardly think it could be. I leave the matter in your hands, and only hope this letter will not make your heart as heavy as mine has been since this thunder cloud, for I can call it nothing else, burst over my head."

The dean despatched his letter to Doctor Marsh's house with orders that it should be forwarded to him immediately; and then resigned himself, with what patience he might, to waiting for an answer; but no answer came. What could it mean? He hardly knew whether to be pleased or not. It surely meant, at least, that Doctor Marsh knew nothing of great importance, and as the dean watched day by day Maud's improving looks, and evi-

dent happiness, he almost rejoiced to think it was so.

His anxiety began rather to decrease, too, from simply watching Sir Guy and Maud. Now that he felt so deep an interest in it, he began to appreciate far more than he had ever done before, Maud's wonderful power over Sir Guy. He really seemed to be almost gaining strength from her. His manner ever grew quieter, and the very expression of his bright face seemed more steady than it had been.

"You are better pleased now, papa, are you not?" Maud asked one day, a short time after the engagement had taken place. She knew her father's face well, and her deep affection for him made her very quick-sighted where he was concerned.

"I am pleased with all I have noticed, my child; but are you prepared always to support, never to lean?"

"Yes, I am now," she answered.

"It is not an easy task, Maud, for a wife to do it, and yet keep her own place."

"I know that, papa; but it is not impossible. I am so glad you are more easy on the subject. It makes me so much happier."

That was the only thing wanted to make

Maud perfectly happy. If she could only have felt certain that her father was entirely satisfied, there would not have been, for the time, a single cloud in her bright sky. Not even one of Mrs. Darryll's providing. For the time she was all amiability, and Maud was thankful; though, on that point, not very sanguine for the future.

"Maud, you are the good angel of our family, I do believe," she said one day. "Positively, it is three weeks since Guy proposed, and he has hardly been away from the priory at all since, and yet we have not had the slightest approach to a quarrel the whole time. It is all your doing."

"I am delighted to hear it, Isabel," Maud answered.

"And am not I an improving character? Did I not tell you I shouldn't be the least jealous of you now?"

"And you have actually succeeded in keeping to your determination for three weeks; that is a great triumph, is it not?"

"Now, Maud, don't be sarcastic. It is a great shame; you know I have been improving ever since I knew you."

Maud was not inclined to discuss the point, so she only answered—

"Guy wants us to go over to Riverston some day soon. When shall it be?"

"Whenever you please. To-morrow, if you like."

"Very well, to-morrow be it then."

"What does he want you to go over there for?" asked Mrs. Darryll.

"I think he wants an opinion about some improvements he thinks of making."

"Which of course you will have to decide about. Very well, we will go."

"What on earth are you going to do at Riverston, Guy?" his sister asked, as they drove off the next morning, "which needs Maud's superintendence?"

"A lot of things," he answered.

"Inside the house, or out?" she asked, looking at him with some curiosity.

Sir Guy caught the look, and answered a little sharply—

"Outside, of course. What is there to be done inside?"

"Oh, nothing, only I thought perhaps Maud's advent might necessitate some changes."

A little of Sir Guy's old expression was coming back to his face now, but Maud saw it, and interposed—

"I don't think I should care for that. I would rather the house remained as I first saw it."

"It is not going to do that entirely, however," he answered; "but there's plenty of time to think of that. Alterations outside will take longer to arrange. I'll show you all I want, as soon as we have had some luncheon."

"Now, I'm not going to play disagreeable third here," Mrs. Darryll said, as they left the dining-room. "There's no one whose sense of propriety will be outraged by your walking about the grounds with Guy, so I shall go and make myself comfortable in the library with a novel while you make your tour of inspection."

"The most sensible resolution I have known Isabel make for a long time," Sir Guy remarked, as she disappeared. "Now, Maud, come along, and give your orders."

Sir Guy had certainly sketched plans for alterations, which it was not a moment too soon to begin if they were to be completed within a year.

"I shall want something to make the time pass a little quicker," he said. "I never knew before what an age a year is. Oh, Maud! I wish your father had not been so determined."

"He is quite right," Maud answered.

"Yes, I know he is; but sometimes, when I think of it, a dreary sort of feeling comes over me, which would grow into something worse if I didn't check it directly."

"What would it grow into?"

"A sort of foreboding of evil—I know it would; and then I should begin to feel reckless and defiant, and then——"

"What then?"

"I should have the old devils cropping up again, and have to take refuge at the deanery; and there I should get all right, I know."

"Guy, Guy! you must not indulge those sort of feelings. I told you before, you must check them for your own sake. I tell you now, that you must do so for mine."

"I do strive, Maud, against every feeling of the kind. Strive earnestly to be more worthy of you than I am. It is only when I think of the long year that must pass before you are mine, that I begin to feel restless."

"Then don't think about it, dear Guy. It will pass soon enough."

"Humph! I don't know about that; but at any rate I shall have plenty to do. But now come back to the house; it is almost time for

us to start for Stowminster again, and I want you a moment in the house."

"Then Isabel was right, was she?" Maud asked, with a smile.

"What do you suppose she meant?"

"That you intended making alterations inside as well as out."

"So she did, but you don't know exactly what she meant, for all that. I'll soon show you. Come upstairs a moment," he added, as they entered the hall.

He led the way to his mother's rooms, and, unlocking the door, threw it open. Maud entered, and then started with an exclamation of astonishment. The rooms were perfectly empty, every particle of furniture had been removed.

"Oh, Guy! why have you done this?"

"Did I not tell you the past was all past now, Maud?"

"Yes, but what has that to do with this?"

He did not answer for a moment, but stood looking down upon her, and gently smoothing back her hair with his hand. "Queen Maud must have no half allegiance," he said at last, in a low loving tone. "No spectre of the past must remain to throw a shadow over her reign.

These must be your rooms, Maud. The dead queen's memory may, and must, ever linger here for me; but it must be nothing more than a memory now."

"Guy," she said, "you could not think that I——" she paused.

"That you would ever have a selfish thought, or cease tenderly to respect another's feelings? No, not for a moment. I was thinking of myself more than of you when I did this. It was no painful effort either, dearest. The rooms lost their gloom for me from the moment I first saw you standing where you stand now. All that is gone for ever now, I hope, so I determined they should be cleared at once; and when this hateful year is drawing to a close, they will be prepared for the new queen; shall it not be so?"

Maud only answered with a look, but it was quite answer enough.

"I fancy Isabel suspects this, and that was why I did not choose to answer her question."

"But, Guy?"

"What?"

"It seems almost like putting your mother aside, does it not?"

"No, not putting her aside; only quietly lay-

ing her to sleep. Perhaps this wouldn't have been, in fact I feel sure it would not, if my wife had been any other. But you, you sorceress! with that still calm face of yours, have absorbed every feeling. Every place where I have once seen you loses every other association directly. I can't feel now that these are my mother's rooms. I can only feel that you have been here; and, far better still, that they are to be yours. Maud, I believe if I had once seen you at Hardcastle's leap I could go there ever after without the slightest shrinking. How have you managed to bewitch me in this way?"

"Have you no idea, Guy?" she asked, with a smile.

"No, upon my word. I can't understand it. It isn't simply that I love you, for it began before I dreamed of that; and it can't be your love for me, for the same reason."

"So I used to think," Maud answered;" but within the last few weeks I have begun to have a strong suspicion that neither of us are quite right upon either of those two points. You know one sometimes sees things in a very different light when one looks back upon them, from that in which they appear at the moment.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I suspect love was at work from the first moment we met, though neither of us suspected it."

"Then love is a very different thing from what I have ever fancied it," Sir Guy replied, in a low tone. "I thought I had only a profound reverence for you; and even now I believe I stand a little in awe of your majesty," he added, laughing. "Nature has set her own stamp of royalty on you, my queen; I can but be the first of your subjects."

Maud hardly understood his words, perhaps he hardly did himself. She felt her power over him, but scarcely understood its cause. Sir Guy was right, however. Nature had marked her with a right royal stamp, and no evil training had marred Nature's work. But she carried her royalty all unconsciously.

As they descended the stairs they met the old housekeeper—Lady Clara Vere's maid, Sir Guy's nurse, and, ever since then, housekeeper at Riverston. Mrs. Parsons had seen Maud several times during her visit to Riverston, and declared her to be the dearest young lady she had seen for many a day. "Just like a queen," she said, "but so gentle, for all that." Mrs. Parsons had heard rumours which had rejoiced her heart,

and was anxiously watching for further information.

"Well, old woman!" exclaimed Sir Guy, "who are you looking for?"

"For you, Sir Guy. Mrs. Darryll told me to find you, and tell you Mrs. Wellwood was in the drawing-room. She had heard Mrs. Darryll was come over, and wanted to see her. Mrs. Darryll has ordered the carriage in an hour, and she says if Miss Vernon will go to the library, she'll come there as soon as Mrs. Wellwood is gone. I'm just going to send up some tea, Sir Guy."

"A very good idea; will you go to the library, Miss Vernon? I must go and see Mrs. Wellwood."

Thither Maud went, and old Mrs. Parsons stood watching her, with a look of deep interest, as she crossed the hall. It had not escaped her notice that "Miss Vernon" had seemed as if it did not quite accommodate itself to Sir Guy's lips.

"I'll take the tea to the library myself," she said to the footman.

"You, Mrs. Parsons!"

"Yes, why not. I want to speak to Mrs. Darryll," which was not quite true, however. It was not to Mrs. Darryll Mrs. Parsons wanted to speak. She loved Sir Guy as if he had been her

own son, but Isabel had never been a favourite with her.

Maud was alone when Mrs. Parsons entered with the tray. The arrangement of the tea table took a long time.

"Don't you think, Miss Vernon, Sir Guy has done a deal since you were here?" she said at last.

"Indeed he has," Maud replied.

"Ah! the old hall is beginning to look quite another place. It minds me of what it was when I first came here with my dear lady, near twenty-eight years ago.

"Have you been here ever since then, Mrs. Parsons?" Maud asked.

"I have, indeed, Miss. I've been, I might almost say, mistress here ever since my dear lady's death; but I begin to hope I shan't be much longer. Oh, Miss Vernon," she continued, coming close up to Maud, "you know I do love Sir Guy as if he was my own child, so please don't be angry with me for taking so great a liberty, but is it true?"

"Is what true?" Maud asked, with a deepening colour.

"That you are coming here as mistress. Don't be angry with me for asking, dear young lady

but since I heard the report I've prayed every day it might be true. If it only be," she added, with the tears rolling down her face, "I could lie down and die to-morrow, a happy woman."

"It is true!" Maud answered, with a gentle smile, which quite reassured Mrs. Parsons.

The old woman sank down into the nearest chair, and hiding her face in her apron, gave free course to her tears.

"Why, Mrs. Parsons," Maud said, "that's not a very warm welcome."

"Indeed, but it is, Miss, if you could only see how it's just because I'm too happy that I can't help crying. My poor dear young master. Ah, thank God! thank God! There'll be a chance for Riverston now. I've prayed for years he might get a good wife, and now my work's done, and I can die happy."

"Not for many a long year yet, I hope," Maud answered.

"Poor Sir Rupert," the old woman went on, "he'd have been a happy man if he could have lived to this day. Oh, Miss Vernon! keep Sir Guy near you, always."

"Why?" asked Maud.

"Because he'll be a better man if you do; and

you'll bear with him, and lead him gently, won't you? You know I nursed him in his cradle, Miss, so I ought to know him; and, indeed, he'll be just what you make him. Oh, it will be a blessed thing to see him with a good wife. I feel as if a load was lifted off me already. A bad wife would have been just the ruin of him. My poor young master!"

Maud did not much like this. Why was it that every one who had known the Riverses from children always made her feel a vague feeling of anxiety whenever they spoke of them?

"To think of Sir Guy going to be married!" continued the old woman; "why, it seems but the other day that I used to carry him in every morning to his mamma, as soon as he was dressed. And any one would have laughed to hear him call her 'Mamma;' why, she looked but a child herself. My beautiful young lady!"

And then Mrs. Parsons went off into memories innumerable of the sayings and doings of her infant charge, delighted to have found a listener to whom they were as interesting as to herself. Then she came to Lady Clara's death; of that, even now, the old woman could not speak without tears.

"Do you think, Mrs. Parsons," Maud asked, "that Sir Guy is right, that he can remember his mother's death?"

"Yes, Miss, I do believe he does. I remember that day as if it was but yesterday—who could ever forget it? Sir Guy was just dressed, and was playing about while I was dressing Miss Isabel—who was only a few months old, you know, Miss—when my lady came in in her riding habit. She didn't ever notice the baby much, but she came and kissed her that morning; and then Master Guy came running up, and she caught him up in her arms, and such a look came over her face, and she kissed him again and again, and went on so, the child was quite frightened, and began to scream. I could not help saying,—'Oh, my lady, I wish you would'nt go!' 'I must go! I must, Parsons,' she said, and then she went out of the room; but I do think she had a feeling something was going to happen. It was ever so long before I could quiet the child, and he kept saying all the day—'Where's mamma?' and then he would begin to cry again. And all the week afterwards, until my good dear lady was buried, he kept asking for her, and crying, and I do believe he has a sort of memory of it."

"Why did you not go away with the children?" Maud asked.

Mrs. Parsons hesitated for a moment, and then said. "Sir Rupert didn't wish it, and I think perhaps he was right, that it was better not; though it nigh broke my heart to part with Master Guy."

"I can't see that it can have been well."

"Well, Miss, I don't know, Sir Rupert thought so, and so did Mrs. Dudley; and I think, perhaps, they were right, for Sir Guy; I don't think it would have mattered for Miss Isabel."

Sir Guy and his sister came in at the moment and stopped the conversation. "Hulloa, you old gossip!" Sir Guy exclaimed, "what have you been chattering to Miss Vernon about?"

Mrs. Parsons rose from her seat, and turned to leave the room; but as she passed her master, she took his hand in hers, and said, in a choked voice, "God bless you, Master Guy."

"Oh, ho! you have been getting into Miss Vernon's confidence, have you? Well, do you approve?"

"It's just what I have prayed for, Master Guy, since the day they took you away from me," sobbed the old woman.

"There, go along," Sir Guy said, "you're an

old fool, nurse; and the best thing you could have done would have been to have strangled me when I was a little shaver."

He wrung her hand as he spoke, and then joined Maud and his sister. "She's in the seventh heaven," he said. "She always calls me 'Master Guy' when she's in a state of excitement. How did she find it out, though?"

Maud told him a part of what had passed; but the greater part she kept to herself, for future consideration.

Merrily enough the days flew on now, and every day Maud felt less anxious for the future, and more satisfied about Guy. Often afterwards did she look back to those first few weeks of her engagement, and wonder that it had never occurred to her to think that a dream so intensely bright could hardly be a very lasting one.

The dean was beginning to feel better pleased too. Maud's perfect happiness was infectious, and all he saw was satisfactory. If only he had heard from Doctor Marsh. That sometimes troubled him a little.

CHAPTER VI.

CONCERNING PAULINE LISLE.

CHRISTMAS was approaching, and Mrs. Lisle was beginning to be a prey to considerable maternal anxiety. She had by no means forgotten the fact that her daughter had promised Frank Wellwood a decided answer by then; nor those few remarks Pauline had let fall the evening of her return from Riverston, which had excited in her mother's mind that terrible dread that even her well-trained daughter might not be quite incapable of making a fool of herself. In addition, within the last few weeks, some vague rumours had begun to get afloat, which had reached Atherley Park, and made Mrs. Lisle feel doubly uneasy. She did not like to say anything to Pauline; she was not sure whether it would be wise or not; but she had watched her closely, and thought she seemed unusually silent

and thoughtful once or twice. At last, however, she could not stand it any longer, so she said to her daughter one day—

"Pauline, have you heard the reports which are afloat?"

"About what, mamma?"

"About Sir Guy Rivers."

"What, that he is engaged to Miss Vernon?"

"Yes."

"Oh dear yes. I heard that some time since."

"Do you believe it?"

"I neither believe nor disbelieve at present. I shall do one or the other to-night."

"Why to-night?"

"Because I am going over to the priory this afternoon, and I have no doubt that if there is any truth in the report I shall hear something about it from Mrs. Darryll."

"Do you think it is likely to be true, Pauline?"

"How can you ask such a question, mamma? Don't you remember what I told you when I came home from Riverston? I think it is very likely."

"I suppose that was what the dean took her over there for," said Mrs. Lisle. "Mrs. Darryll would like it of all things, I don't doubt."

"I daresay she would for a time," replied Pauline.

"Why only for a time?"

"She would get jealous in a little while."

"I was asked the other day if I believed it," Mrs. Lisle said, "and I said I did not."

"Of course, mamma, and continue to say so until you have positive reason for saying the reverse."

Pauline set off directly after luncheon, alone on horseback, as was her wont; and as her mother watched her she felt extremely bitter against Miss Vernon. It would have been such a match for her; "and I'm sure she's three times as beautiful as Miss Vernon," she thought. Then she puzzled herself with speculations about Frank Wellwood. Would Pauline accept him? And even supposing Sir Guy were really going to marry Miss Vernon, would it be a wise step? Pauline was certainly very beautiful, and she was only one-and-twenty. Would it not be better to wait, and not spoil better chances by a little undue precipitation? How she wished Pauline had not promised a decided answer so soon. By the tenour of which thoughts it would appear that Mrs. Lisle had, internally, a conviction that the unpleasant rumours had some truth

in them. Only one thing rather consoled her. Pauline herself did not appear the least perplexed. She was silent as to her intentions, as she always was, unless she wanted her mother's help; but she seemed very quiet and decided, from which Mrs. Lisle augured that she saw her own way more clearly than her mother could discern it at present.

Nor was Mrs. Lisle wrong. Pauline was perfectly decided as to her own course of action, though what the results would be she felt very uncertain. There were strong chances in her favour, but then she did not know that herself to the full extent, though she had some suspicions on the subject.

Mrs. Darryll received her with even more marked cordiality than usual, but Pauline was rather startled by her appearance and manner. She looked ill, though she denied that there was anything the matter, and her manner was abrupt and rather constrained. Pauline had never seen her looking the least like she did at that moment.

"Why, I havn't seen you for an age, Pauline," she said. "Why have you not been over to see me?"

"Why have you not been to Atherley?"

Pauline asked. "I have been over here since you were there."

"Oh, I'm sure I hope you don't keep a strict creditor and debtor account in those things. I'm the worst visitor in the world, and besides, I have been so tied I couldn't get away from home at all. Thank goodness, I'm a little more free now, for a time at least. How long is it since I have seen you?"

"Not since I left Riverston, and I am afraid that is full two months now."

"Two months, Pauline, impossible!"

"Indeed it is possible, and absolutely the case; but I have not been at home all the time. I have been paying a short visit or two in the neighbourhood, but I hear you have been tremendously busy."

"Who told you I had?"

"Canon Herbert. I heard him telling one of the people I was staying with that he thought you almost lived at the orphan school now."

"Great nonsense," replied Mrs. Darryll, shortly; "but it is always the way, if I do undertake anything, I always find people throw everything on to me. I almost wish sometimes I had left the whole thing alone; the other ladies on the committee just leave me to do everything

and it is a great tie. However, so far it is something to do, and it is horribly dull here, I must allow."

"What! even with Miss Vernon at the deanery?" asked Pauline.

"Oh, no; I did not mean it in that way; you must not think for a moment that I meant to imply that Maud was not just as much to me as ever, even more in fact. But then I cannot always be with her, and there is really not a soul here besides that I care to speak to. I didn't for a moment mean any allusion to Maud."

"I'm so glad, for you gave me such a fright for a moment."

"A fright, Pauline! How?"

"Why, you speaking in that way made me suddenly think of that silly report I told you about, just before you went to Riverston; and a horrible dread came over me whether it was possible I had made mischief between you and Miss Vernon by telling you about it. I should never have forgiven myself if it had been so."

"Oh, dear no! not at all. I never——; that is, it was not the least consequence. I am the last person in the world to allow anything to make mischief between me and a friend."

"I am so glad; for, to tell you the truth, my indiscretion has been causing me great anxiety, though I didn't dare to say anything about it. I couldn't help fancying when I was at Riverston that Mrs. Darryll seemed to try and avoid Miss Vernon rather pointedly, and I have never been easy since, but I did not venture to say anything."

"I'm sure I never noticed anything of the kind," Mrs. Darryll replied, but her colour heightened a little.

"I don't doubt it was only my fancy," replied Pauline. "You see I began, after I had spoken to you, to think I had done a foolish thing, so I was rather nervous, and prepared to take alarm easily."

"Most unnecessarily, certainly; but, my dear Pauline, I must tell you one piece of news which will, I am sure, surprise you; but you must remember it is a profound secret for the present, so you must know nothing if you hear any rumours. My brother ——"

"Stop, stop, please, dear Mrs. Darryll!" exclaimed Pauline, interrupting her. "Don't tell me another word, I implore you."

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Darryll.

"Because I had rather not know. You see

nothing concerning Sir Guy can be of any consequence to me, and if, as you say, rumours should get about, people would be sure to question me, knowing that you and I are friends; and it will be so much easier for me to be able to say I really know nothing, than to be obliged to try and fence. It is so awkward always, and one is so rarely successful."

"Well, I don't know, perhaps you are right. I think in your place I should feel the same. I know if I know anything that other people don't and want to find out, I always feel as if every one I met was staring at me, and trying to read my face. It is so horrid, and people are always prying into one's affairs, and trying to find out everything about one."

"Sir Guy is staying with you, is he not?" asked Pauline.

"Not now; he has been here a great deal since we were at Riverston, but he is gone now. He went over to Riverston last week, and he is going to pay one or two visits in the neighbourhood directly. I hope I'm quit of him till after Christmas."

"What an affectionate sister you are!"

"So would you be, I can tell you, if you had Guy for a brother. However, I must do him

the justice to admit that he has really been a different creature lately. I couldn't have believed any man could have altered so much in so short a time."

"Is Sir Guy at Riverston now?" Pauline asked.

"I am not quite sure; he is either there or at one of the houses near; but I really don't know. I fancy he will have to go to London early in the new year, to settle business about property in the north, and is likely to be away some time, so he is paying off a lot of visits he had promised to pay beforehand. You are not going?" she added, as Pauline rose.

"Yes, indeed I am. I have only just time to get home now."

"Well, then, you must answer me one question before you go. I have been expecting you to give me the information all this time, but you don't seem inclined."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Darryll?"

"Why have you not told me that you are going to be married?"

"I going to be married! Who on earth told you such a thing?"

"I have heard a report from several people that you are engaged to that Mr. Wellwood,

who was staying at the vicarage at Riverston while you were there."

"My dear Mrs. Darryll, I beg you will contradict the report wherever you hear it, on my authority. I can assure you there is not the least truth in it."

"Really, Pauline?"

"Yes, really. Why should you doubt it?"

"Because, my love, I saw something at the ball which made me think it possible Mr. Wellwood might not be quite as emphatic on the subject as you are."

Pauline looked very thoughtful for a moment, and then said, gravely, "I hope and trust you are mistaken. Frank and I have always been more like brother and sister than anything else, and I hope that is all. But, at any rate, you may certainly give the contradiction, and I beg you will. Mamma would be so annoyed if she heard anything of the kind."

With that Pauline took her departure, and shortly after Mr. Darryll came in.

"Who has been here, Isabel?" he asked.

"How do you know any one has been here?" she replied.

"Because there are the marks of horse's hoofs on the gravel."

"Well, and if there are, why should you want to know everything about it?"

"My dear Isabel!" exclaimed her husband, in astonishment; "why should I not?"

"Because I don't choose to be questioned about who I see. It is something new for you to take such a deep interest in my visitors. I suppose I may see who I like, without interference? Perhaps," she added, with a sneer, "you were only anxious to know if Maud had been here, but I can assure you it was not her, so you need not make yourself uneasy."

With these words, accompanied by a look which brought Lady Bellingham's portrait strongly before Edgar Darryll's mind, his wife swept out of the room, leaving him a prey to utter, bewildered astonishment. What had produced the outburst, he could not imagine. Isabel had been gradually growing gloomy and irritable for some little time, which he had attributed to the constant headaches of which she complained, but he had never been treated to such an outburst as this; and her last remark fell like a thunderbolt, bringing to his remembrance, as it did, what Sir Guy had said to him the day of their arrival at Riverston. If Isabel was going to take to that, well ——, he did not

know exactly what he thought; but it amounted to a pretty strong conviction that his domestic peace was at an end. But how unaccountable it seemed that she should have shown no signs of any such tendency, until after Maud's engagement to Sir Guy seemed to render any such suspicions absolutely absurd. Suddenly, with a start, he rang the bell—"Who has been here this afternoon?" he asked when the servant appeared.

"Miss Lisle, sir."

"Did Mrs. Darryll see her?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's all. You may go."

The man retired, and so did his master, with anything but a pleased expression of face.

Pauline Lisle paused for a moment as soon as she had passed the priory gates, as if uncertain in which direction to proceed. Her hesitation was only momentary, however, and then she turned her horse in the direction of Stowminster, and rode up to the deanery. Maud was at home, and received her with that quiet dignified reserve which Pauline had always found it so impossible to penetrate.

"I am come to you in great anxiety, Miss Vernon," she said.

"What is the matter?" Maud asked.

"I have just been calling at the priory, and I am quite shocked at Mrs. Darryll's appearance. Don't you think her looking dreadfully ill?"

"I do not think she is very well, but she will not allow that there is anything the matter; except that she has had rather frequent attacks lately of those headaches she so often suffers from."

"But, indeed, I am sure there is more the matter than that. I dare say you do not notice the change so quickly as I do; you see her every day, so it would come more gradually to you; I have not seen her since she was at Riverston, and I was quite shocked at her appearance. She looks so much older, and so worn. Surely she must be unhappy about something?"

"I do not think she has any subject for unhappiness," replied Maud.

"Is not Mr. Darryll anxious about her?"

"I really do not know. I do not even know whether he has noticed that she is not well."

"Does not Sir Guy see it?"

"You had better ask him that question," said Maud, with a laugh, as she quietly returned Pauline's steady look, "I should not think it very likely. I don't think Sir Guy Rivers is a

man very likely to notice anything of the kind; besides, as he has been staying so constantly at the priory of late, the change would be nearly as gradual to him as to me."

"But don't you think," Pauline said, slightly disconcerted by a nameless something in Maud's manner, "that Mrs. Darryll could be persuaded to take medical advice?"

"Mrs. Darryll has a great objection to doctors, especially strangers; and, unfortunately, Doctor Marsh is still absent from home."

"What! not come back yet?" exclaimed Pauline.

"No. He has been detained abroad by the illness of a relation, I believe; but he is expected home shortly, I understand; and, if it is any consolation to your feelings, Miss Lisle, I may tell you that Mrs. Darryll has promised me she will consult him about her health if she continues to suffer from these severe headaches."

"I'm so glad to hear it. I did not like to say very much to her myself, but I thought I would venture to come and speak to you about it, for really her appearance quite startled me," and Pauline having by this time had quite as much of Maud Vernon's society as she cared for, rose to leave.

"Have you any commands for Riverston, Miss Vernon?" she said, "I think I shall probably go over to see Aunt Wellwood in a few days."

"Certainly not, thank you, as I have not the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Wellwood."

"But I thought ——" she stopped.

"Thought what, Miss Lisle?" asked Maud.

"That you might have some commands for Sir Guy," Pauline had intended to say, but she did not. She looked rather confused as she caught Maud's eye, and substituted, "I thought you had met Aunt Wellwood at Riverston hall."

"So I did, one morning, when she called on Mrs. Darryll. But that could hardly constitute such an acquaintance, I think, as to render it likely I should have any commands, as you express it, for Mrs. Wellwood."

Pauline began to wish she had been more cautious, and beat a retreat, with a mental vow that she would not measure arms with Maud Vernon again.

"Where have you been this afternoon, Pauline?" her father asked, when they met at dinner.

"To call on Mrs. Darryll and Miss Vernon."

"What made you call on Miss Vernon?"

"I went to speak to her about Mrs. Darryll."

"What about Mrs. Darryll?" asked Mrs. Lisle.

"She is looking so ill, mamma. I never saw any one so changed in so short a time; and she seemed so odd, she was not a bit like herself. She was very cordial to me, but so abrupt in her way of speaking. She seemed to me, all the time, as if she was thinking of something else."

"But what made you go to Miss Vernon about it?"

"I went to ask her if she could not persuade Mrs. Darryll to consult some doctor about her health, for I am sure she cannot be well."

Mrs. Lisle smiled as she asked, "And what did she say?"

"She was very cool, as she always is, to me; but she admitted she did not think Mrs. Darryll was very well, and said she had promised she would consult Doctor Marsh when he came home, if she was not better."

"I thought he didn't practise now," said Mr. Lisle.

"No more he does, regularly. It is only as a favour."

"Did you hear anything about this rumoured engagement?" asked Mr. Lisle.

"What engagement, papa?"

"Between Sir Guy Rivers and Miss Vernon."

Pauline laughed contemptuously. "I believe it is the purest piece of scandal that ever was invented," she said.

"I'm not so sure of that," said her father, "I met Feversham the other day, and asked him about it, and he seemed to think it was not very unlikely. He said he only hoped it might be true, for he believed it would be the best possible thing for Sir Guy."

"The best possible thing for Miss Vernon, I should think he meant," put in Mrs. Lisle, "considering that Sir Guy Rivers is the best match anywhere about."

"I don't think Miss Vernon would think much about that," said Mr. Lisle, laughing, "and she can afford to be disinterested, with the fortune she will have. She's a splendid creature certainly; just the sort of girl to keep that fellow in order."

"Did you really hear nothing about it, Pauline?" asked Mrs. Lisle, to whom praises of Maud Vernon were by no means agreeable.

"Not a word, mamma, and I do not in the least believe the report. Mrs. Darryll talked a good deal about both Miss Vernon and Sir Guy, but she never said a word in the least implying

that there was even a distant chance of such a thing. In fact, she said Sir Guy was probably going away soon after Christmas for a long time, which would hardly be likely, if he was going to marry Miss Vernon. I should not have the least hesitation in saying to any one that I am sure there is no truth in the report."

"And I shall certainly do the same," Mrs. Lisle said; "if you heard nothing about it to-day, it is pretty certain to be only a report got up by idle tongues."

"Yes, I would contradict it everywhere, certainly, if I were you," remarked Mr. Lisle, "it's much more prudent to do so."

Mrs. Lisle immediately rose to leave the table, suppressing with difficulty the sharp answer which was on her lips. It was too bad of her husband, after so often impressing upon her the fact, that she must provide a settlement for her daughter by the aid of her own wits, to be so hard upon her. He always had a half sneer ready for every attempt she made on Pauline's behalf. But Pauline herself quietly answered her father—

"Yes, it is more prudent, and the right thing too. Miss Vernon is the last girl in the world who would care to have such reports spread

about her. Even if it should come to pass afterwards, it will do no harm the report having been disbelieved; and if it is, as I really believe, untrue, it ought to be stopped, for Miss Vernon's sake."

"Bravo Lena!" exclaimed her father, "how very considerate you are of Miss Vernon's feelings. I didn't know you had such a tender regard for her."

"No, papa," replied Pauline quietly, "I have not a tender regard for her, but I have a considerable respect for her, and I'm sure she doesn't deserve to be the subject of idle gossip, which perhaps some people might believe, even though they know that she can, as you said, afford to be disinterested. She is very fortunate in having had a father who has taken good care of that."

With a gentle smile accompanying the barbed words, Pauline followed her mother, leaving her father resolved to be more cautious in future. It was not the first time he had winced under his beautiful daughter's lash, though it was about the most pointed thing she had ever said.

"Pauline, my love, that was rather too sharp," Mrs. Lisle said, as they crossed the hall. She was a good wife in the main, and didn't quite

like to hear her husband too severely handled, even though she felt he deserved it.

"It's no such thing, mamma," she answered, bitterly, "you know quite well I've nothing—worse than nothing—to thank papa for, and I'm not going to be taunted, or to allow you to be taunted either, with what is entirely his doing. He must learn to control his tongue, at least in my presence."

There was more feeling in her tone, even though there was a great deal of bitterness in it, than her mother had often heard there, and she gently answered—

"You mustn't distress yourself about these things, my darling. There are hundreds of other girls are obliged to do the same, and only marry for a good settlement, and are very happy afterwards, and make very good wives. It is very few, I can tell you, who are so fortunate in that respect as Miss Vernon."

"I know that, mamma, quite well, and I don't complain. Only I won't be taunted, that's all."

"But Pauline, my dear, do you really believe that it is not true that Sir Guy Rivers is going to marry Miss Vernon?"

"I do believe," Pauline answered, almost

fiercely, and with a strange cold glitter in her eyes, "that he will *not* marry her. Whether he is engaged to her, or not, has nothing to do with it; but, as I told you mamma, Mrs. Darryll never breathed a word on the subject to me, though she talked about them both; so you are quite justified in saying, as I shall say, everywhere, that it is not true."

"Very well, my dear," Mrs. Lisle quietly replied, and then sat silent, pondering deeply over what had passed. She could not fathom her daughter's intentions. It seemed so contradictory, that she should now speak as she did, and refuse to admit, even to her mother, openly, that she thought Sir Guy Rivers' reported engagement to Miss Vernon might really be a fact, after having spoken as she did the evening of her return from Riverston. But she did not distress herself much about that, she had great faith in her daughter's skill. But there was one subject which did, at this moment, rather disturb her serenity, and that was the bitterness with which Pauline had spoken about her own position. She had never shown any such feeling on the subject before; and yet, her subsequent remarks hardly warranted the supposition that her words had been merely the

result of a momentary fit of disappointment, and Mrs. Lisle, having had her fears once aroused, was quick to take alarm. She had never forgotten the quiet announcement Pauline had made, that she cared more for Frank Wellwood than she ever should for any one else. Could that same feeling be the cause of her bitterness now? Could it be that which was making her rebel against a necessity, to which she had always, hitherto, seemed quite resigned? Mrs. Lisle greatly feared it was so, and began again to feel alarmed at the thought that perhaps, even yet, Pauline might be induced to turn romantic. The train of thought led her at last to the question—"What makes you say that you don't think Sir Guy Rivers will marry Miss Vernon, whether he is engaged to her or not?"

"Various things," replied Pauline.

"But what do you mean by various things?"

"I can hardly tell you, but I have a strong impression to that effect. Time will show whether I am right or not."

"I should hardly think, having secured for herself—supposing, of course, that the report is true—the best match in the county, Miss Vernon will let it slip."

"It won't depend upon her. Nor is she the sort of girl to think about that, mamma. If she accepted Sir Guy, it would be because she really cared for him."

"Well, I should think the dean would take care to hold him then."

"It won't depend on the dean, either."

"What do you mean, Pauline?" asked Mrs. Lisle, a little impatiently. "You are very enigmatical to-night."

"I don't care to say what I think, mamma. Time will show whether I am right; but a great deal will depend upon accidental circumstances, which no one can foresee. But, at the present moment, I certainly do not think Miss Vernon will ever be Lady Rivers."

With that announcement Mrs. Lisle was fain to be content. Pauline clearly did not want any help from her, at present, and therefore she was not very likely to get much out of her.

A few days after Pauline told her mother, one morning, that she was going to Riverston.

"Why are you going there?" Mrs. Lisle asked. She did not know whether to approve, or object. There were certainly some advantages in Pauline being there, but then she knew quite well that Mrs. Wellwood favoured Frank's

suit, and that, with her present dread on the subject, caused her many misgivings.

"I have not seen Aunt Wellwood for some time," Pauline replied; "besides, I am tired of being here, so I think I shall very likely settle to go over there for a few days."

"It is dull for you here, certainly, my dear; but I should think Riverston vicarage was not much better."

"It is a change at any rate," Pauline answered; "and it suits me to go there just now."

Mrs. Wellwood received her as affectionately as ever; though, to tell the truth, the good old lady's feelings towards her beautiful great-niece were by no means so unmixed as they had been. She was constantly getting letters from Frank Wellwood, which troubled her greatly. There was such a hopeless despondent tone about them. He was evidently very unhappy, and by no means sanguine as to the future. The more, too, that Mrs. Wellwood thought over Pauline's conduct, the more dissatisfied she felt with it. "It is all very well," she said, to her husband, "to say the circumstances were peculiar; I grant that, but I don't think it was quite right. I am sure Pauline did not mean to deal

unfairly with Frank, but it was too hard to put him to such a trial."

"Well, but," replied Mr. Wellwood, "it was his own doing. He wouldn't take No for an answer, so what could the girl do?"

"Yes, I know all that, and I'm quite sure dear Pauline didn't mean to be cruel; but it was a cruel thing to do, and I can't help thinking she might have made up her mind in a shorter time than this. I do not like the whole thing, at all. I could not tell you how it has distressed me. Sometimes, when I read poor Frank's sad letters, so different from what they used to be, I feel really quite angry with Pauline; but the moment I see that sweet gentle face of hers, and think how much better she is than might have been expected with such an education as she has had, I feel I cannot be angry with her."

This was exactly the state of the case. When Pauline was away at Atherley, Mrs. Wellwood did sometimes feel almost angry with her, and inclined to condemn her conduct as heartless; but when Pauline appeared before her, and looked at her with those beautiful grey eyes, and spoke to her in her low sweet-toned voice, she could not feel hardly towards her. She

could only sigh, and wish she had been differently brought up.

Pauline found Mrs. Wellwood in a high state of delight. "Oh, I am so glad you are come, dear, I want to show you something so much."

"What is that, auntie?"

"We have just finished the new conservatory, at the end of the drawing-room, and it is such an improvement. I have just got all the plants arranged. Do come and look at it."

Pauline duly admired the really pretty little conservatory, with its beautifully arranged plants. Then suddenly looking up she exclaimed—

"Oh, auntie! what an exquisite lamp! where did you get it?"

"Ah," said Mrs. Wellwood, in great triumph, "I thought you would soon discover that; did you ever see anything so beautiful in your life? Guess how I came by it."

"I should never guess in a month," replied Pauline; rather suspecting that the lamp had come from some one she did not care to mention to her aunt. "Do tell me where it came from?"

"It was a present from Sir Guy Rivers. He came down here, a little while ago, and was quite delighted with the conservatory, and I

consulted him about a lamp for it; and a few days after, that lamp came down from him, with a message to say that he should invite himself to dinner some day soon, that he might see how it looked when it was lighted. You have no idea how beautiful the light is, through that pink glass. You must stay and dine, and sleep here to night, my dear, just that you may see it lighted."

"No, indeed, I cannot do that," Pauline said, "but that needn't prevent my seeing it lighted soon, auntie, for I want you to let me come to you for a day or two, if you will. I am getting quite dull at home."

"Of course, my dear, I shall be delighted to have you. When will you come?"

Pauline named a day. And upon consideration of this intended visit, Mrs. Wellwood resolved to put off what she had otherwise intended to do that very day—enter a strong protest against poor Frank being left any longer in a state of suspense, even for the few weeks which would bring them to the time when Pauline had promised him a decided answer; and to urge her to an immediate decision.

"Did you say that Sir Guy is at Riverston,

auntie?" Pauline asked. "I thought he was at the priory."

"He is not at either now," replied Mrs. Wellwood. "He is over at Archerfield, and I'm sure I wish he was not. He came over from the priory some little time since, but he did not stay very long at Riverston. He was looking so well."

"Why do you wish he was not at Archerfield?"

"Because I don't think it is at all a good place for him. They are a wild lot, and he is much too excitable for such a place. Colonel Digby has a large hunting party there now, and I think Sir Guy would have been much better away. But Pauline, my dear, have you heard the news about him?"

"About Colonel Digby, aunt? No."

"No, not about him. About Sir Guy."

"I have heard nothing about him either," replied Pauline.

"Have you not? How strange. Why there is a report about that he is engaged to Miss Vernon. I do so hope it is true, she is just the girl for him. Oh, I do hope it is true; but we did not like to ask him any questions, as he said nothing about it. How very strange that you should not have heard of it."

"Oh, now you speak of it, I believe I have heard something of the kind, but I never gave it a second thought, and I am quite certain, auntie, that it is not true."

"Are you my dear? I am very sorry to hear you say so. But what makes you feel so certain about it?"

"Simply that I saw Mrs. Darryll a short time since, and she talked to me about both Sir Guy and Miss Vernon, but she never said a single word about anything of the kind."

"Did she not? Well that does seem certainly as if it could hardly be true. I am so sorry. I was quite in hopes it was, for she certainly did come over to Riverston some time ago with Sir Guy and Mrs. Darryll, and walked about the grounds in the afternoon with Sir Guy."

"Did she! are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Well, there's no knowing, auntie, it may happen yet as you wish. All that I feel certain about is, that it has not happened yet. I should think Miss Vernon would suit Sir Guy admirably."

"I am sure she would; but wasn't it rather strange, if it is not true, that she should come over here with them in that way?"

"You may depend upon it, that is Mrs. Darryll's doing," replied Pauline, with a laugh. "She is so infatuated about Miss Vernon. I daresay she was wanted over here, and refused to come unless her beloved Maud came with her."

"I'm sure I don't wonder at her being devoted to her. I thought the day I saw Miss Vernon at Riverston she was one of the most charming-looking girls I had ever seen; though I think if it wasn't for those beautiful large soft eyes, I should be almost afraid of her. She is such a stately, dignified creature."

"She is. She would make a splendid mistress for Riverston hall, wouldn't she, auntie?"

"She would indeed, my dear. Are you going?"

"Yes, indeed I am."

"It is a long lonely ride for you this dark day."

"I don't mind that, auntie. Larkspur is in splendid condition. We shall do the distance in no time, and I feel just in the humour for a wild ride."

And a wild ride it was. Larkspur, at least, found out, if no one else did, that something had disturbed the serenity of his young mistress.

CHAPTER VII.

A VERY NARROW ESCAPE.

THE moment Pauline had left the vicarage, Mrs. Wellwood sat down and wrote a long letter to Frank, telling him that she was coming to stay at Riverston, and urging him to come down and plead his own cause. It was, as she pointed out to him, within a very few weeks of the time when Pauline had herself promised him a definite answer; and she was sure if he would only come down he might have it at once. She thought it was very likely, she said, that Pauline had already made up her mind, and had only not fulfilled her promise of writing herself from a feeling of shyness at taking so decided a step.

If Mrs. Lisle had known of that letter, her aunt would have seen very little of Pauline. And Mrs. Wellwood had been not far off some

rather unpleasant explanations with her niece. Mrs. Lisle had been seriously meditating driving over to Riverston before Pauline went over, to talk to her aunt on this very subject. To tell her how much she objected to the idea of any engagement, and to beg her not to forward it in any way; but a judicious dread of offending Mrs. Wellwood, of whose affection for Frank she was well aware, made her afraid to venture; so she was obliged to let things take their own course, and trust to Pauline's good sense.

The next day's post brought Frank's answer. It was impossible for him to get away from London at that moment even if he had cared to do so, but he did not think he did. He was determined, he said, to have Pauline's answer in writing before he saw her again. If that answer was not what he wanted it to be, he would never see her again; and he certainly did not seem very sanguine. He was evidently thoroughly low, and out of spirits; and Mrs. Wellwood began to tremble for his health, the whole tone of his letter was so despondent. However, he concluded by saying that he quite agreed with her in thinking he might fairly press for an answer now, so he would write to

Pauline while she was at Riverston, and then Mrs. Wellwood could say whatever she liked herself.

This answer afforded Mrs. Wellwood abundant food for consideration. She felt by no means certain whether she had better say anything to Pauline, or leave Frank to plead for himself. At any rate, she thought she would at least wait until his letter arrived, and then decide according to circumstances. Pauline had so evidently avoided all mention of Frank of late, that she was not sure that it was wise to introduce the subject. All her intentions were, however, routed the very morning after Pauline's arrival by her quietly asking—

"Have you heard from Frank lately?"

Mrs. Wellwood was so astonished, that for a moment she did not answer, and Pauline repeated the question.

"Yes, my dear, I heard a few days since."

"How is he, auntie?"

"He is very unhappy, Pauline."

"Poor fellow!" she said softly. "I feared it would be so."

"Oh, Pauline, you have been very cruel, though I don't think you intended it."

"I know I have, and I have often reproached

myself for what I did. I ought to have acted differently."

"How ought you to have acted?" asked Mrs. Wellwood.

"I ought to have insisted on Frank taking my refusal as final at once."

"I don't think that would have mended the matter."

"Then how, in heaven's name, would you have had me act, aunt?"

"I don't see that you could have done otherwise than you did at the moment; but I think you ought to have given him a decided answer much sooner. You don't know how unhappy he has been."

"Has he?" said Pauline.

"He has indeed. His letters have made me quite wretched. He seems to have almost made up his mind that it is impossible you can care about him, or you would never have kept him so long without an answer."

"Poor Frank!" Pauline said again. "The fact is, aunt, I never thought at first he would care. I judged him by the sort of men I have known, and thought he would soon get tired of the whole thing, and let it drop. It was not till I got his first letter from London that I

began to see he was really more in earnest than I had believed, and then it was too late."

"But why could you not have sent him a decided answer before now?" asked Mrs. Wellwood, rather impatiently. "You must have had time enough to consider. Oh, Pauline, it is cruel, indeed it is, to trifle with a man in that way."

"I could not, indeed I could not, auntie. I would have done if I could. The whole thing has really troubled me, but I had no power to act otherwise."

"I don't see how that can be," said Mrs. Wellwood.

"Ah, you don't know," replied Pauline, bitterly. "You little dream what life at Atherley is."

"What has that to do with it?"

"A great deal—more than you think; but it is no use talking about it now. I am very sorry Frank is so unhappy, but I cannot help it."

"But you must decide soon, Pauline; you promised, you know."

"What I have promised I will perform," Pauline answered, not caring to prolong the conversation. She had learned all she wanted

to know, and something more besides. She had begun to feel anxious as to whether Frank was quite staunch. She had heard nothing of him for so long; and Mrs. Wellwood's answers had been more than enough on that subject; for she was not quite unmoved by hearing of Frank's unhappiness.

Two or three days passed, and Mrs. Wellwood watched in vain for the expected letter; but at last it came, and her heart beat faster as she saw Pauline open it, and read the first few lines. But then, with a perfectly unmoved face, she put it aside, and devoted herself to the tea-urn. When Mrs. Wellwood entered the drawing-room, however, an hour afterwards, she found Pauline with the letter lying open on her lap, and her head resting on her hand in deep thought.

"Oh, Pauline! Pauline!" she exclaimed, almost unconscious of what she was saying. "Have compassion on my poor boy. You will break his heart if you refuse him."

"Then you know what is in this letter, aunt?"

"Yes, I do. He told me he meant to write while you were here. You don't know how madly he loves you; don't drive him to despair.

Write and make him happy. You love him, I am sure you do."

"I'm by no means sure," she said, with a short hard laugh, "that under any circumstances I am very likely to make Frank happy."

"You will make him happy enough, if you will only say you love him."

"I'm not so sure of that, but at any rate I cannot answer him at the moment."

"Pauline! it is too cruel."

"Frank chose his own fate, and he must abide by it, aunt," she said. "I don't mean to keep him long in suspense, but I must think. I did not expect to have to answer this question until Frank came down himself."

Mrs. Wellwood was just going to answer, when the door suddenly opened, and Sir Guy Rivers entered.

"Will you allow such a splashed sportsman to enter your drawing-room, Mrs. Wellwood?" he said.

"Willingly," she replied, "though certainly you are a very speckled object this morning. What have you been doing?"

"Ridden straight across country from Archerfield," he answered. "It's so tame riding along a road all by oneself; but it's a stiffer country

than I thought for. This is a most unexpected pleasure, Miss Lisle," he added, turning abruptly to Pauline. "I thought there seemed an unusual brightness about Riverston as I approached, but I had no idea what the cause was. I didn't know you had come to light up its gloom."

"I can't imagine why you will always talk about Riverston being gloomy," Pauline replied gravely. "It always seems to me so very much the reverse. I think it is the most cheerful-looking country village I have ever seen in England."

"Ah, yes, I daresay," he replied; "but then, you see, you always see it under such favourable circumstances. I know it doesn't look gloomy now. If you could see it when you are not here you wouldn't wonder."

Pauline looked up at him as he spoke for a moment. There was a strange tone in his voice, it almost sounded like mockery. He was leaning against the chimney-piece, looking full at her, and their eyes met. Pauline's sank directly. Mrs. Wellwood looked up too, and then asked—

"Are you going back to Archerfield?"

"No, the party there have broken up, I am sorry to say. We have had a glorious fortnight,

though they are rather a wild lot, I must say. I'm awfully sorry it is over."

"Then are you going to stay at Riverston?"

"Only for a few days. Then I'm going over to the Feversham. I don't feel much inclined for solitude after such a party as we've had at Archerfield."

"Who has been staying there?" Mrs. Wellwood asked.

Sir Guy ran through a long list of names, and then seeing Mrs. Wellwood looked rather grave, he added, laughing—"Now don't look so serious. I know they are rather a wild lot, and that you think I had better not have been there; but I can assure you I have been a perfect model of steadiness all the time. You don't know what an improving character I am, Mrs. Wellwood. I'm not half so excitable as I was. With advancing years I am becoming quite a reformed character, and quite capable of resisting even the seductive influences of Archerfield."

"I am quite willing to grant that you are an improving character, but I doubt your wisdom in being in such a hurry to put it to the test."

"Well, but look here, I am calmness itself, to show how very well I have stood it."

"Then what brought you tearing across

country from Archerfield, without any particular object, this morning?"

Sir Guy shrugged his shoulders with a grimace. "You are a great deal too sharp, Mrs. Wellwood. I decline any further controversy. By the bye," he exclaimed, suddenly jumping up, "I had forgotten all about the lamp, which I came on purpose to see. How does it do, Miss Lisle? I hope you admire it. I should be in despair if it did not meet with your approval."

"I think it is wonderfully beautiful," Pauline answered, "but you cannot half appreciate it now. You ought to see it lighted, the effect at night is the prettiest thing I ever saw."

"That's just what I mean to see," Sir Guy answered. "It does look very jolly certainly, even by daylight. I really didn't know I had such good taste. I think I must have caught the infection from you, Miss Lisle. Isabel used to say I had the worst taste in the world."

"More likely, I should think, from Miss Vernon," replied Pauline. Sir Guy was standing almost behind her, at the moment, contemplating the lamp; but his reflection in a large glass was straight before her, and that answered all her purpose. She saw that he started slightly—

"Why from Miss Vernon?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"Because you see much more of her than of me, and she has such remarkably good taste in everything," replied Pauline.

Sir Guy did not answer. He stood silently looking out into the conservatory for a few minutes, and then turning to Mrs. Wellwood, he said—

"Will you let me come and dine with you this evening? I want to speak to the vicar."

"We shall be delighted to see you," she answered, "but won't you stay and have some luncheon now?"

"No, thank you; I must go and get made fit to be seen, after my wild ride. Good morning, Miss Lisle. It breaks the pang of parting to know that we shall meet at seven o'clock this evening."

"That's just exactly what I expected would be the end of his going to Archerfield!" Mrs. Wellwood exclaimed, the moment the door had closed behind Sir Guy.

"What?" asked Pauline.

"Why, he's just got into one of his excitable fits again. I do wish he had not gone there. He was so different when he first came over

from Stowminster, and now that place has just overturned him again."

"He does seem in rather a restless mood, certainly," Pauline answered.

"And no wonder, after being at that place. A nice set they have had there too. The women worse than the men, I think. I'll answer for it they have had a 'glorious fortnight,' as he called it. I wish he was safely married, and settled down. I've always had a dread of his getting among the Archerfield set, and that would keep him out of it."

"You seem very bitter against the Archerfield people, auntie," said Pauline.

"So I am, I believe, my dear. That place has been the cause of a great deal of mischief about here, and I am sadly vexed that Sir Guy should have gone there. It's no place for any young man, even without being so excitable as he is."

Mrs. Wellwood had more cause for speaking strongly on the subject of Archerfield than she cared to tell Pauline. She had seen and heard more than enough, during the twenty years she had been at Riverston, to justify her dread as to what the consequences to Sir Guy Rivers would be of his becoming at all intimate with Colonel Digby, or any of his family.

Pauline made no answer, and seemed silent and absent all the rest of the morning. More than once Mrs. Wellwood looked at her with some little anxiety, and when at last they rose to go to luncheon, she noticed that she was very pale.

"My dear Pauline," she said, "try and decide, as you feel it is right you should, and then happiness will be sure to follow."

Pauline very nearly looked surprised for a moment. Her aunt's remarks by no means fitted so exactly with the tenour of her thoughts, as the old lady imagined they would; but she recovered herself in time, and only said gently—

"It's not always quite so easy to do that, as it seems, auntie."

"I know that, my dear, but I am sure you will try to do what is right; and remember, the whole happiness of an honest, brave, loving heart is at stake."

"Aunt! you must not try and influence my decision in that way," Pauline said, turning a shade paler.

"No, I don't want to influence your decision, dear. I only want you to weigh the matter well before you decide irrevocably. But you are looking quite pale, my love, you must go

out this afternoon, and have a good ride before the day closes."

"I'm going to do so," Pauline answered. "I have told them to bring Larkspur round directly after luncheon."

"That's right, dear. Go and gallop back your roses. I cannot bear to see you look so pale."

Pauline and her horse were nearly as splashed as Sir Guy himself had been when they came in again, just at dusk, and there were roses enough on her flushed cheek to rather more than satisfy Mrs. Wellwood, and to suggest alarms about her having over-fatigued herself; at which, however, Pauline only laughed, and escaped to her room, saying—"Send me a cup of tea, like a dear good auntie."

The tea came, and Pauline looked wonderfully beautiful as she sat drinking it beside the fire; seated in a low easy-chair, with her long hair unfastened, and falling in a shower all round her. It wanted fully two hours to dinner, so she had plenty of time before her. Time to let the too brilliant colour her somewhat wild ride had called up subside to the tint she knew it would leave; and time, too, to think, which was what she wanted as well. It was too hard, just at this particular moment, to be forced to give Frank

Wellwood a decided answer, when she had so fully counted on at least three weeks more liberty before she did so; and, for a moment, she almost thought she would write and put him off again, but then she took out his letter and read it, and the idea vanished. Frank said he would not come down until he had her answer; and there was, moreover, a tone about the letter which made her think it would not do to try anything of the kind—a tone which told her that he would not bear trifling with—that he had borne his probation as long as he could endure it, and that he had reached that point when he would almost rather face the worst than continue any longer in suspense. She laid down the letter, and sat thinking long and deeply, until at last she had planned out her course of action, and then she took up the letter and read it again; at least, she began to read it, for she did not get very far before she started up, and angrily threw it into the fire. She might well start, and glance round the room as she did. Could it be possible that stifled sob had come from herself? Yes, it was possible, and what was more, one large tear fell upon poor Frank's loving letter. When first she had read it, she had been so absorbed in con-

sidering how she should act that she could think of nothing else; but when she took it up the second time, she had decided that point, and had time to think of Frank, and to realise something, at least, of his feelings when he wrote it, and to become suddenly conscious that after all she was not quite so secure of her position as she fancied; and that she might yet have a battle to fight before she could resolve not to make a fool of herself. At any rate that letter, with its tone of deep manly feeling, was dangerous, so she put it out of her power to read it again, and then proceeded to dress for dinner, feeling very much ashamed of her own most unaccountable folly.

Sir Guy Rivers, meanwhile, had been restlessly wandering about the house at Riverston, cursing his own folly for having ever gone to Archerfield, and yet conscious of a longing to go back there again; one moment determining he would go over the next morning to the deanery, and the next resolving he would not give way to such folly, as not to be able to check his own excitability unaided. A beautifully executed miniature of Maud had taken his sister's place in the locket now, and he looked long and earnestly at it; but, for the moment, he thought

it almost made him feel more restless. His conscience would ask him, what look would have come into those deep eyes if Maud could have seen some of the scenes in which he had been an actor lately? or some of his companions in those scenes? Nor was he at any loss to picture the look, and it made him feel very miserable. He had promised her he would avoid danger, and he knew he had not kept his word, even though her image had guarded him through it, unscathed, he had believed till this moment, but now he began to feel that that was not quite the case. Then he thought of Pauline Lisle, and wondered what on earth had brought her to Riverston at that moment; and, for an instant he almost resolved he would send down an excuse, and not go and dine at the vicarage, but as instantly he changed his mind again, and then, distrusting his own determination, he rang the bell, and ordered a carriage round at ten minutes to seven, in order to strengthen his wavering resolution. He felt almost a feeling of relief, when he entered the vicarage drawing-room, at finding Mrs. Wellwood alone; and yet he felt conscious, all the time, that he was watching for Pauline's entrance. She did not appear, however.

"Where's Pauline?" Mr. Wellwood asked, as dinner was announced.

"She'll be down directly," Mrs. Wellwood said; "we won't wait."

She came downstairs just as they crossed the hall, and quietly took her place, opposite Sir Guy, at the table. More than once, during dinner, his eyes were fixed upon her, and he wondered why it was that every time he saw her he thought she seemed to grow more beautiful.

"Rivers," Mr. Wellwood said, as soon as Mrs. Wellwood and Pauline had left the dining-room, "I'm going to read you a lecture."

"About going to Archerfield? You needn't do that, I'm repenting of that already."

"What took you over, among such a set as that?"

"They're a very jolly set, I can tell you," replied Sir Guy.

"They are a thoroughly bad set, if you like," replied Mr. Wellwood, "and it was the last place to which you, of all men, ought to have gone."

"I know that well enough, and I am sorry now I did go. However, you see I have escaped unharmed this time, thanks to ——"

"Thanks to what?"

"My guardian angel, I suppose. One is supposed to have such appendages, isn't one?"

"I should say yours must have had a pretty severe time of it then," replied Mr. Wellwood; "and I am not sure that you have escaped unharmed, though you certainly have done better than you had any right to expect when you went and put yourself among such a set as that."

"I'm awfully penitent, I can assure you; but you needn't be alarmed. There's no fear of my being wanted to go there again before this time next year; and by that time I shall be out of harm's way."

"How so?"

"Why, I shall be out of harm's way, or past harming, that's all," Sir Guy replied, in a low tone; "and upon my word, I sometimes don't feel quite sure which it may be. God grant it may not be the latter."

Mr. Wellwood looked at him in astonishment. A sort of look of dread had come over Sir Guy's face as he spoke; but in another moment it had passed, and he laughed as he caught his host's wondering expression.

"You think I am slightly deranged by my unlucky visit, don't you?" he said; "but I'm

really speaking words of sober reason, and you'll understand them some day, though not just yet. No, I'm not going to drink any more wine; but you'll indulge me by letting me go out and smoke a cigar for five minutes, before we go to the drawing-room, won't you? It's such a close night; a few minutes in the open air will do me good."

"Very well, off you go then," said Mr. Wellwood, well pleased to let him go; for he did not like the bright hectic flush under each eye, which had been gradually increasing on Sir Guy's face all through dinner.

It was a very close dull night; not a breath was stirring, nor a sound audible, save Sir Guy's own tread on the gravel, as he walked up and down, smoking his cigar. At last, a rather longer turn than usual brought him beyond the corner of the house, and in full sight of the conservatory; and of something more, which made him start, and stand still for a moment. Then he stepped softly on to the grass, and, silently approaching the conservatory, stood looking through the glass door, which opened on to the lawn.

On a low couch, which Mrs. Wellwood had had put into the conservatory, Pauline Lisle was sitting, intently reading, the soft warm

light from the coloured lamp throwing a rich glow over her. She was half shaded by the glossy leaves of a magnificent camelia, standing in the corner, just behind the couch. One faultless arm was almost concealed amidst the foliage, with which she was carelessly playing; just gleaming through it, here and there, with almost unearthly brightness; while one small spray of dark-green leaves, which she had carelessly drawn down, was lying on her white shoulder. The other arm and hand were resting across the book in the full glow of the bright light, in which her downcast face, and rich dark wavy hair, seemed to gain fresh beauty. It was a dangerous picture for any man, in the mood Sir Guy was in at that moment; and as he stood and gazed, the hectic flush deepened, and his breath came quick and short. At last he laid his hand on the lock of the door. Pauline's start was perfectly genuine, and she only just recognised him in time to check the scream which was rising to her lips. She had not expected to see him there, at any rate.

"Oh, Sir Guy!" she said, in a low tone, "how you startled me. I never dreamt of your coming in that way."

More beautiful still she looked with the bright flush of colour the fright had brought up over face, arms, and shoulders, and Sir Guy's admiring look was bold enough to send even her eyes down on to her book, in some little confusion.

"What has brought you in so early?" she said. "You are not due for half an hour at least, and Aunt Wellwood is just in the middle of her after-dinner nap. Look at her," she continued, leaning across and drawing back the heavy green velvet curtain, which half shaded the entrance to the drawing-room, "doesn't she look comfortable? It seems a shame to wake her."

"Don't then, till Mr. Wellwood comes in," he answered, not looking, however, at Mrs. Wellwood, but at Pauline's hand and arm, holding back the curtain. "I went out to smoke a cigar, so slipped in, in an unauthorised manner. Make room for me on the couch here, beside you, and we can have a little friendly chat till the tea-urn wakes up Mrs. Wellwood."

Pauline drew back her dress, and Sir Guy sat down, but he did not speak for a few minutes. Then he suddenly said—

"I hear I am to congratulate you."

"Congratulate me! What about?" she asked, raising her eyes to his face.

"I heard you were going to be married."

"Going to be married! Who told you that?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Some one said that you were going to be married to your cousin. No, by the bye, he's not your cousin, I believe, is he? I mean that fellow who was here in the autumn, who did me out of my waltz, too, I remember, at our ball."

"What, Frank Wellwood?"

"Aye, that's the fellow I mean. Well, people are all saying you are going to marry him. Is it so, Miss Lisle? Surely you're not going to throw yourself away on him?"

"I don't know why you talk of my throwing myself away on him," Pauline replied; "not, however, that I have the slightest intention of marrying him. But the woman who marries Frank will be a very fortunate one."

"Oh! ho! Then Wellwood may go in for the winning," said Sir Guy.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, he's awfully in love with you, any one might see that; and when a girl begins to talk about a woman being fortunate who gets a man, the rest's easy enough. So my con-

gratulations are only a little premature, that's all."

"Sir Guy Rivers!" exclaimed Pauline, haughtily, "you forget yourself strangely."

"Enough to make any fellow do that," he muttered, looking at her. "I beg your pardon, Miss Lisle," he said aloud, "I didn't mean to speak in any way that would offend you; but really, I do think you would be throwing yourself away if you married that fellow. You mustn't be angry with me again for saying it; but you must know how beautiful you are."

"As if beauty ever gained a woman happiness yet," Pauline exclaimed, with a scornful flash in her eyes. "If I ever do marry, I shall be a fortunate woman if I get half so good a husband as Frank Wellwood will make."

"Then why don't you take him? He worships the very ground you tread upon."

"Poor Frank! I fear he does," Pauline said, with a deep sigh.

"Then why on earth don't you make him happy?"

"That's a question you have no right to ask, Sir Guy. Not, however, that I have any objection to give the answer—I simply don't love him."

"And yet think the woman will be fortunate who gets him. That seems to me rather a paradox, Miss Lisle."

"I daresay it does," she answered; "I should have thought it so myself, a few months since, but I have learned to understand now that the course one's head tells one is the right one is not always the one one's rebellious heart chooses to accept. Some people may, perhaps, be guided solely by their heads, but, unfortunately for me, my heart will have a voice, and so my lot may not be one which, nevertheless, I should envy any other woman."

"Do you mean that you have no heart to give, Miss Lisle?" Sir Guy asked; and she felt the couch tremble as he did so.

"That is a question you certainly have no right to ask, and which I have not the slightest intention of answering," she said, with a deepening colour.

Sir Guy bit his lips, but he made no answer. She knew that he was trembling in every limb, though. He leaned his elbows on his knees, and buried his face in his hands for a few moments, till he grew quieter. He would have given anything to have fled, but he felt rooted to the spot; his brain was whirling. At last he

looked up again, and said in a constrained tone—

"Well, I'm really glad I'm not to congratulate you, for I'm sure you might do better."

"Ah, that's the way," she replied, "you're always ready enough to taunt us with looking out for good settlements, as you call it, but you're the first to run a girl down, and call her a fool, if she does allow her heart a voice, and marries for love, when she might have sold herself to a higher bidder."

The scornful gleam in her eyes was almost more beautiful than her melting mood.

"Don't be so bitter," Sir Guy said. "I seem to be doing nothing but put my foot in it to-night. I really didn't mean that, though."

"Then you spoke what you felt without meaning it, that's all the difference."

"How awfully sharp you are. I think I'll change the subject for a less dangerous one. I wish you would take that spray of camelia leaves off your shoulder. It has been causing me the liveliest uneasiness for some time."

"Why?" she asked, in surprise.

"Because leaves of that kind are always associated in my mind with caterpillars, and I have been dreading, all the time that we have been

talking, that I might see one of the wretches crawling along your shoulder."

"How can you suggest such a horrible idea?" she said, with a shudder.

"Aye! a caterpillar on your shoulder! it is a horrible idea," he replied.

"But perfectly absurd," Pauline said, "for they never go near camelia leaves."

"I beg your pardon, I found a large one on a camelia leaf the other day. Please move those leaves off your shoulder."

"If you object to them so much, you had better move them yourself," she replied. "I have no objection to them."

Sir Guy looked at her for a moment, as if he hardly knew whether to take her at her word or not; but the half mocking smile playing round her mouth seemed to dare him to do it, and tremblingly he laid his burning hand on her shoulder. The cool soft touch only seemed to send the blood flying faster through his throbbing veins. He bent down, and, in another moment, his hot lips would have been pressed where his fevered hand was resting; but suddenly he shot to his feet—every trace of colour faded from his face—he stood for a

moment, trembling from head to foot, and then, in an instant, he was gone.

Pauline turned pale enough, too. She bit her lip, and a strange variety of expressions flitted across her face. Mortification, disappointment, and indignation, seemed all at work, as she leaned her head thoughtfully down on her hand, and in that position she sat, until Mr. Wellwood entered from the drawing-room.

"Why, Pauline!" he exclaimed, "how pale you are, child. What's the matter?"

"Nothing, uncle, beyond my having a headache."

"Ah! I knew you had done too much today," said Mrs. Wellwood. "You are not so strong as you would make out. You ought not to over-fatigue yourself, my dear child."

"Indeed, I did not, auntie. It is only the close sultry evening that has made my head ache."

"Well, it is very close," said Mr. Wellwood. "If it was not for the time of year, I should say there was thunder in the air. But where on earth can Rivers be?"

"He was here a few minutes ago," Pauline quietly replied, "talking to me. I fancy, finding you did not appear, he went out to indulge in another cigar."

Mr. Wellwood went out to look for him, but Sir Guy was not to be found. "What on earth can have become of the fellow?" he said, as he came in again. "He cannot have gone home, surely?"

"I daresay he has," Pauline said; "taken one of his strange whims, I should think."

Mr. Wellwood was by no means satisfied. He did not like Sir Guy's appearance or manner, and, for a moment, he almost resolved to send a servant up to the hall, to find out whether Sir Guy had returned home; but Mrs. Wellwood strongly opposed the idea.

"He would not like it," she said; "besides, you will know presently whether he has gone home or not; for if he has not, they will send a carriage down."

"I am quite sure it is all right," Pauline put in. "There's nothing wrong with Sir Guy; he was talking as quietly as possible to me, just before he went out."

"I wish you would go to bed, my dear," Mrs. Wellwood said. "You're looking quite ill to-night."

"I think I will, auntie. My head is aching a good deal."

To her room Pauline went, but by no means

to bed. She could not have slept, if she had. Till long past midnight she sat by the fire, thinking over all that had passed, and making her calculations accordingly for the future; not altogether dissatisfied, and yet thoroughly puzzled by Sir Guy Rivers' conduct. She pondered again and again over all that had passed, in hopes of finding some explanation of the sudden change that had come over him, but all in vain. It was as unaccountable as it was extraordinary. Of one thing alone she felt certain, and an almost triumphant smile played about her lips, as she thought of it; that had Sir Guy stayed in the conservatory five minutes longer, her answer, the following day, to Frank Wellwood would have been different from what it would be now; and might, perhaps, in the end, have been a better one for him to receive, for at least it would, as far as he was concerned, have been a truer one. And now! "Poor Frank," she said, almost aloud. "Well, it can't be helped." Then she rather congratulated herself on having had the wisdom to burn his letter.

With teeth firmly set, and with a knitted brow, Sir Guy Rivers strode homeward that night. The rain was falling heavily, but he

did not know it; a deluge might have descended upon him at that moment, and he would hardly have felt it. He was conscious of nothing but the tempest raging within. He knew, quite as well as Pauline Lisle, what a narrow escape he had had; though, for the moment, he was almost too confused, and too excited, fairly to understand it. He reached his own room, he did not know how; heard, as in a dream, the entreaties of his servant that he would take off his wet clothes; yielded without knowing that he had done so; and then, when the man had left the room, he threw himself down on the bed, and trembled like a leaf, as he tried to remember what had passed. It was all a wild confusion. He only knew that from the moment he had stood watching Pauline through the conservatory door, until the moment he had fled, his blood had been flying faster and faster through his veins, and his head had throbbed more wildly every moment. He had a confused remembrance of talking to her, he hardly knew what about, until the moment he had felt the touch of her cool soft shoulder against his burning hand, and then he knew he had trembled on the very edge of the precipice. One moment more, and the burning kiss he was bending

down to press upon it would have been followed by still more burning words — words which could never have been taken back, and which would have stood for ever, as an impassable barrier, between him and all his hopes for the future; and what had saved him? He knew it must have been the creation of an overheated brain, it could be nothing else; but just at that moment, so clear and distinct that he almost fancied he could see it still, had risen before him the image of Maud Vernon. His own pure, beautiful Maud, with her still calm face, and deep clear eyes, had seemed to interpose between him and the syren whose fatal spell was on him, and to break the charm, and give him power to fly. She had saved him, at the very moment he was false to her; and he writhed in bitter remorse and shame as he thought of that scene, and of how unworthy it had shown him, to himself at least, of such a love as hers. How could he meet again, without a burning blush, her loving, trusting smile; or ever, without a bitter sense of shame and humiliation, receive that gentle loving kiss, which sometimes she would press on his forehead? He groaned as the thoughts passed rapidly through his mind. He had said, and believed,

he was not worthy of Maud, but he had never believed he was so unworthy as that; never believed his wild excitability could have carried him so far. Something very like a curse was on his lips, as he thought of Pauline Lisle, and some hard words rose to his mind, if they were not uttered. It was no idle fancy then that he had felt from the first about her. She had worked him mischief already, she had caused him shame and humiliation, and how much more mischief might she not work for him? He vowed he would never see her again, as long as he lived, of his own free will, and then he cursed his own folly for going to Archerfield. If it had not been for the wild reckless life he had been leading there for the last fortnight, he would never have revelled in such an excited state as to have been so near destruction; for destruction he felt it would have been to him. With all these thoughts raging in wild confusion, he lay, with his face buried in the pillows, until at last he fell into a heavy slumber, which had more of a dull stupor about it than of actual sleep.

It was late the next morning before he woke, and some time then before he could recollect what had happened, but when he did, his thoughts were

even more bitter than they had been the night before, as morning remembrances are sometimes too apt to be. The feverish excitement of the night was gone now, leaving only a dull throbbing pain across his brow, and a feeling of utter hopeless depression, which was almost unendurable. But for very shame, he could have lain and sobbed like a child. He longed to go off to the deanery, and yet, for the first time since he had known her, he shrank from the thought of meeting Maud; and every moment the dark cloud of despondency seemed to be settling down more heavily upon him. At last a gentle knock at his door roused him, and in answer to his "Come in," Mrs. Parsons herself entered the room. She was looking very grave and anxious.

"Hulloa, old woman!" Sir Guy exclaimed, "what's brought you here?"

"I came to see how you were this morning, Sir Guy, and I declare you've never been in bed, only lying there in your dressing-gown."

"Never mind about that; what made you come to see how I was?"

"Because Willis said he was sure you were ill last night, and you do look very ill. Oh, Master Guy! What have you been doing?" she asked, in a tone of intense anxiety.

"Doing?" he repeated, "the devil's work, very near, and what would have given me a pretty good chance of blowing my brains out; but I got safe off that time."

Mrs. Parsons stood looking at him sadly for a few moments, and then she said—

"You ought never to have gone to that place, Master Guy. I knew no good would come of it. They're a bad lot."

"You're just right there, nurse, but you needn't worry yourself now; I've had a fright that'll keep me quiet for many a long day to come, I can tell you."

"Pray God it may," she said, clasping her hands, and still looking at him with an anxious troubled look. "I can't bear to see you look like that."

"Do I look very bad?" he asked, sitting up. "Give me the glass."

She handed him a glass, but his hand trembled so much he could hardly hold it.

"Heavens!" he muttered, as he looked at his own reflection. He might well start at the pale haggard face and bloodshot eyes that met his gaze. "Look here, nurse; like a good creature, go and get me some brandy. I can't stand this; my nerves are all gone smash altogether, I think."

"No, no," she exclaimed, "not brandy, Master Guy, not brandy. I'll bring you something, but not that."

"Pshaw, nonsense! It's the only thing. I tell you I can't stand this; I shall go mad, or cut my throat, if I don't get something to take away this horrible feeling of depression. Bring me the brandy."

"No, not that," she repeated, "not that, for Miss Vernon's sake."

She spoke the last words in a low entreating tone, so low that they were little more than a whisper, but Sir Guy heard them, and started, and shivered. Then, with something like a groan, he threw himself down again on the bed, saying hoarsely, "Well, have your own way; but, for Heaven's sake, bring me something, I can't stand this long."

Mrs. Parsons left the room, and her tears fell fast the moment she was out of her master's presence. She soon returned again, however, and handed him a glass, saying, "There, Sir Guy, drink that, it'll do you more good than the brandy."

"It's to be hoped it may," he said, as he handed her back the empty glass, "for it's confoundedly nasty. You're a good old soul, nurse,

all the same, for not letting me have the brandy. If it had been that ass Willis, he'd have brought it, straight off."

"Willis didn't rock you in your cradle, Sir Guy," she answered, as she turned to leave the room.

"Send him here in a couple of hours' time," he said.

"Very well, Sir Guy;" and Mrs. Parsons disappeared to attend to her morning duties, with a heavy heart and many a deep sigh, greatly wondering, too, what had happened to sweep away, as it seemed, so suddenly and so entirely, for the moment, all the effects of Maud's pure and soothing influence on her young master.

And while Guy Rivers was lying there, a prey to bitter remorse, and to utter depression, Pauline Lisle, calm and lovely, in the most becoming of morning dresses, and looking as fresh and bright as if no such thing as a headache existed in the world, was writing a long letter to Frank Wellwood; a letter which would make his pulses throb, and his blood fly through his veins, though with a very different feeling from Sir Guy's the night before. At last it was finished, and sealed,

and then Pauline laid it on the table before her aunt, saying—

"Frank is answered, auntie."

"How answered, my child?"

Pauline kneeled down beside Mrs. Wellwood, and putting her arms round her, laid her beautiful head on her shoulder, as she said in a low voice—

"He will be very happy when he gets that letter."

"God bless you, my darling child!" Mrs. Wellwood exclaimed fervently, fondly returning Pauline's embrace, "and give you every happiness. You have made me very happy too."

"Have I, auntie? I am so glad;" and the soft cheek was pressed lovingly to hers.

"I did wish it so very much, my dear, far more than I have ever ventured to tell you, because I thought it almost seemed like trying to influence a decision which I felt ought to come from yourself alone. My poor boy, how happy he will be too. Oh, Pauline, you don't know how dearly he loves you. I believe it would have broken his heart if you had rejected him."

"Poor fellow! But hearts are tough things, auntie."

"Some are, Pauline, but not all; and they

are sometimes broken without people finding out that they are."

"Well, we won't talk about it now; it is such a dreary subject," Pauline replied. "Has anything been heard of Sir Guy, or has he disappeared from this wicked world altogether?"

"No, he is all right. But why he went off in that way, we have not the least idea. Your uncle had a hasty note from him this morning, apologising, but without explaining; and saying he was going away this afternoon, but not mentioning where he was going."

"He is a most extraordinary man, certainly," Pauline replied, thoughtfully. "I never saw any one the least like him."

Pauline went home that afternoon, and Mrs. Wellwood let her go very contentedly; quite satisfied now that the life she so much deplored for her would soon be ended, and picturing to herself in glowing colours how much Pauline would improve in the happy domestic life she already fancied her leading, as the wife of Frank Wellwood.

Mrs. Lisle received in silent consternation the information, quietly given by her daughter, when she reached home, that she had accepted Frank Wellwood.

"Why don't you say something, mamma?" Pauline said at last.

"I don't know what to say, Pauline."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't exactly know what you mean."

"I mean just what I say."

"But I don't like the idea of your marrying Frank Wellwood."

"Marrying him, mamma! who said I was going to marry him?"

"You have just told me so."

"I told you I had accepted him. I never said I was going to marry him."

"I must confess then, my dear," her mother answered, "that I don't understand you."

"Bless me, mamma," Pauline said, rather impatiently; "you are dreadfully matter-of-fact. I suppose you've been thinking of love, and all that kind of thing. No, no," she added bitterly; "I've got over that, at least I think so. I'm engaged to him, that's all; marrying is quite another thing, and will have to be thought about afterwards. Mamma, you must tell papa about this. Frank will write to him, I think."

"Your father will say you must please yourself, my dear."

"Which I should take the liberty of doing without consulting him," she answered. "But it does not happen to suit me exactly in this case that he should say so. You must make him say to Frank that he has no objection to the marriage in the course of a year or so, but not just at present."

"But what reason can he give for saying so?"

"Any reason he likes, I don't care, so that he says it. You must manage it somehow, mamma."

"Very well, my dear, I will speak to him to-morrow; but I must confess I don't understand you, now."

"I daresay not," Pauline answered; "but you will do some day."

Mrs. Lisle would have understood well enough if Pauline had told her of that scene in the conservatory, or shown her Frank Wellwood's letter; but the former she did not choose to do, the latter she could not do, as that letter was safely burned.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STORM BURSTS!

PAULINE LISLE'S visit to the deanery, and professed fears about Mrs. Darryll's health, had been by no means necessary to rouse Maud Vernon's fears on the same subject. The bright gleam of sunshine—which had seemed even brighter by contrast with the doubts and perplexities which had immediately preceded it—was already slightly clouded over. The change which she had dreaded would come over Isabel had begun to appear, though not exactly in the way she had expected. Mrs. Darryll was very restless and irritable, complaining constantly of severe headaches, which Maud, in part at least, attributed to the tremendously long walks and rides which she had taken, regardless of both her husband's and Maud's remonstrances and assurances that she was overtasking her strength.

"It is no use for you to say it is not good for me, Maud," she said one day, when Maud had found her utterly exhausted by a very long walk, and had remonstrated accordingly. "I know I require a great deal of exercise, and I should have the headaches all the same without, because they had begun before I was taking so much exercise. I believe it was want of exercise first brought them on."

"I don't want you not to take exercise," Maud replied; "but it certainly cannot be good for you to take it to the extent you are doing now. You look quite ghastly with fatigue."

"And so I feel, I can tell you. I am utterly done up; but then it will make me sleep to-night."

"Do you not sleep well?" Maud asked.

"No. I can't close my eyes all night sometimes, and I never really sleep well now, unless I am thoroughly tired out, and not always then, either."

"Then, Isabel, that is quite enough to prove that you are wrong in saying there is nothing the matter. You ought to have instant medical advice."

"I never said that there was nothing the matter. I only said there was nothing the

matter with my health, and that is quite true. I hate doctors; besides, there is no use in my seeing one; he couldn't do me any good."

"You are no judge of that, and indeed, dear Isabel, you must not go on in this way. If you won't yield to please me, I shall talk to Edgar about it."

"Indeed you had better do no such thing, Maud," replied Mrs. Darryll, sharply. "You don't know what you are talking about, or what is the matter; but, at any rate, I should be much more likely to yield for you than for Edgar."

The words and the tone startled Maud, and only served to increase her uneasiness, but she only said laughingly—

"Then prove it, by consenting to consult some doctor about your health."

"But, I tell you, it is useless. No doctor could do me any good. There are some complaints," she added, with a sigh, "that no doctor can reach."

"And I tell you again," replied Maud, "that you are no judge. Only try the experiment."

Mrs. Darryll still opposed the idea, but at last she yielded, and promised that as soon as Doctor Marsh returned, she would consult him as to the cause of her headaches and sleeplessness.

"But, mind," she said, "I do it only to satisfy you, dear Maud, for I know he can't do me any good."

"Very well, we will consider of that after he has tried," Maud replied. "He is to be home very shortly now, I hear, and, in the mean time, do promise me you will not exhaust yourself by tremendous walks and rides."

"I will try," Mrs. Darryll answered, "if you wish it; but I cannot promise. I feel sometimes that I cannot stay quiet, and if that feeling comes on, I must work it off in some way."

With this promise Maud was fain to be content, but she felt very anxious. That there was something very wrong, she was certain, and it rather increased than diminished her anxiety to find that in her present irritable and restless state Isabel had no fault to find with her. It boded that she was very much pre-occupied in some way, and some of her remarks had both tended to point Maud's fears and bring back to her mind remarks of both Doctor Marsh and Mrs. Feversham.

A few days after Pauline's visit, Maud was startled one morning by Edgar Darryll suddenly entering the drawing-room at the deanery, and exclaiming abruptly—

"Maud, for Heaven's sake, do come up to the priory, and see what you can do with Isabel."

"What is the matter?" Maud asked, with a sinking heart.

"Matter!" exclaimed Mr. Darryll, "I only wish I knew. She's in the most tremendous state about something; but, for the life of me, I can't make out what it is."

"But tell me what has happened."

"Well, you know she hasn't been like herself for some little time. She has been so irritable and restless she has nearly driven me mad sometimes; and she is always complaining of these headaches, and as for sleeping, I don't believe she gets twelve hours' sleep in the course of a week. I have begged her to take medical advice, but she won't. She has always said there was nothing the matter, at least that a doctor could reach, and so it was no use. She has been decidedly worse, however, ever since Miss Lisle was there, the other day; but this morning the storm has burst. She didn't come down to breakfast, saying she had a headache; so I went up to her dressing-room afterwards, with a letter I wanted to consult her about answering. Her maid was just finishing her hair, and I thought she looked very queer, but I

began asking her about the letter, when, suddenly, she turned round like a fury upon Ross, ordered her to leave the room instantly, and then such a storm burst on my head as I never heard in my life. She was as white as a sheet, and seemed fairly choking with passion."

"But what was it about?" Maud asked.

"That's just what I cannot make out. I tried again and again to make out what was the matter, but I could not, she was so utterly incoherent. At last she went off into strong hysterics, and I found my attempting to interfere only made her worse, so I rang the bell, and then left her. But what on earth can it all be about, Maud?"

"I cannot tell. Are you sure there has been nothing happened to account for her being unhappy?"

"Nothing, that I know of; but I wish you would go up there, I am really uneasy about her."

"So am I, Edgar, and have been for some time. I think she is far from well, and that that probably has to do with all this; though what is the matter, I cannot imagine."

"Nor I," he answered, sadly; "but oh, Maud! this is a sad prospect for me. This outburst this

morning was more like one of Guy's, in his worst moods—such as you have never seen, and I really believe never will see—than anything I have ever seen in Isabel."

Maud was silent for a few moments, and then asked, "Does Isabel know you have come here?"

"No; she doesn't know anything about it."

"Then I think you had better go back, and say nothing about it. I will follow you in a few moments. She will, I daresay, be more likely to tell me what is the matter if she does not think I have been sent for, than if she knew it."

Edgar Darryll met Maud in the hall, when she reached the priory. "She is better now, I believe, but Ross says she would not allow her to stay in the room a moment, and gave her notice to quit immediately. What can it all mean, Maud?"

Maud shook her head, and slowly ascended the stairs. Mrs. Darryll was lying on the sofa in her dressing-room, and Maud was shocked at her appearance.

"Maud," she said, "what has brought you here?"

"I came to see you. Not a very uncommon

occurrence that, is it? and I heard you were not well, but I was not prepared to find you so ill as you look. Isabel," she added, gently, sitting down beside her, "what is the matter?"

"Matter! That I am sick and tired of my life, and I wish I were dead," she exclaimed, vehemently.

"Hush! hush!" Maud answered; "you must not speak in that way."

"But I do wish it," she repeated, sullenly.

"So much the more reason that no one could echo the wish for you," Maud said, gravely, "even if you had ever so good reason to express such a wish."

"And I suppose you don't think I have?"

"No; I am quite certain you have not."

"Much you know about it, then. I could not have believed you were so blind as not to have noticed what has been going on of late."

"I have noticed, with very great anxiety, that you have been very unlike yourself for some time."

"And do you really mean to say, Maud, that so much here as you have been you have never seen what was the cause?"

"Most certainly I have seen no cause."

"Is it possible? I could not have believed it.

Ah! but then I was forgetting," she added; "I can't expect you now to feel so great an interest in all that concerns me as you did. But I am very glad it is so. It is much better it should be unknown; and if you have failed to discover it, perhaps others may, though I can hardly hope that. In fact, I have reason to fear it is already noticed and commented upon."

"Isabel, what do you mean?" Maud asked.

"No, I won't tell you. It is better not. I have been feeling very wretched for some time, I will allow, and quite unable to think or decide how to act. But you must not think me a great fool for it; all people have not so much self-command as you. I had a violent fit of hysterics this morning, and I think it has really done me good. I feel much more able to think quietly now. You are a dear darling sister, but you cannot help me here."

All which made Maud more determined than ever to find out what was the matter; but it was a long task. For more than an hour she sat, talking gently and quietly to Isabel, until at last she carried her point.

"Well," Mrs. Darryll said, "I will tell you, though I am not certain that I am right in doing so. Is it possible that you have not noticed

during the last few weeks how changed Edgar has been to me?"

An exclamation of astonishment was rising to Maud's lips, but she checked it in time, and only answered, "No, indeed. I have noticed nothing of the kind."

"Really? Well, I can hardly believe it. Oh, Maud! you have no idea how miserable it has made me. I began to notice a change in him some time since. At first I thought something had worried him, and that it would pass off. But I very soon began to detect a systematic coldness and hardness in his manner towards me, so different from what it used to be. You don't know how miserable it has made me. You see I was right when I told you no doctor could do me any good. What medicine could cure such an ailment as that? I have thought about it day and night. At first I thought I had perhaps done something to annoy him, but I could not think of anything; yet every day, as it passed, seemed to bring me some fresh proof of the truth of what I had noticed, until—oh, Maud! how shall I tell you all that passed this morning? I was feeling very ill and very wretched when I got up, so I would not go down to breakfast. Not that Edgar seemed to care about that," she said,

bitterly. "Just as Ross was finishing my hair, he came into the room; some excuse about a letter, I think, but I'm sure I forget; but as he came in, Ross looked round, and in the glass I saw, most undoubtedly, a look of intelligence pass between them. I couldn't describe what I felt. I was utterly confused by the number of slight circumstances which came back to my memory in a moment. I can only wonder now that I could have been blind so long. I don't remember distinctly what happened afterwards. I know I sent Ross away, and then I believe I spoke in a very excited way to Edgar, and I remember that he professed not to understand what I meant, which only made me more angry, and at last I went into hysterics, and then he just went away and left me, evidently not caring the least. I know Ross came in again, and I gave her warning to leave, and sent her out of the room directly, but beyond that I don't remember much until the fit passed, and since then I have felt better, though my head aches very much, and I feel very wretched."

Maud had allowed her to run on without interruption, somewhat perplexed herself how to act. Her worst fears were realised, while at the same time she felt herself placed in a new and

untried situation, and forced to act with but very little to guide her as to the best course to pursue. She could but trust to her own judgment.

"I don't wonder that you should feel so, Isabel," she said. gravely; "but I think you will feel still more so when you arrive at the power of viewing the subject in a clearer light."

"What do you mean, Maud?"

"I mean that, when you can see the truth, you will feel much ashamed of your present conduct."

"I cannot understand you. I'm sure I see the truth only too clearly now."

"No, you do not; you see nothing but a phantom of your own creation. I told you some time since that your health needed attending to; you would not believe it, and this is the result. You have got into a low morbid state, which, with the help of constant over-fatigue, has produced a degree of feverish excitement, out of which this ridiculous idea has grown; for I really can call it nothing else. And when you arrive at a little more healthy frame of mind, and begin to feel how causelessly you have been bringing most unfounded accusations against a husband who has been always the

kindest of husbands to you, to say nothing of your gross injustice to so thoroughly respectable a woman as your maid, I do hope, for your own sake, you will have the grace to feel thoroughly ashamed of yourself."

"Well, that is too cruel," exclaimed Mrs. Darryll, with a half sob. "You to turn against me, when I have so much to bear. Of course you think it is all my jealousy—you always say that; but I have been most carefully on my guard against that, and, moreover, as you might see, I never suspected anything until it was forced upon me. Numbers of things have happened which, if I had been the least suspicious, would have alarmed me sooner. Oh, Maud! it is too bad to speak in that way."

"No, it is not cruel. I am only telling you the truth. Do you think, if I was not quite convinced there was no foundation for your suspicions, I should not be the first to take your part?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Darryll.

"Isabel!"

"Now, don't get angry, Maud; but I mean that the thought did just cross my mind that you might be inclined to try and shelter Edgar at my expense."

Maud bit her lip, and was silent for a moment, but Mrs. Darryll was too much absorbed in her own affairs to notice the expression that crossed her face.

"I tell you confidently, Isabel," Maud said, after a little, "that you are wrong, and that nothing but disordered health is the cause of all these ideas."

"Oh, Maud! I only wish I could believe that. I would give anything if I could."

"So you will, without any trouble at all, if you will only take the proper course."

"What! ask Edgar about it, do you mean?"

"No, certainly not. I should recommend you not to let him know what a fool you have been."

"You are civil, certainly."

"No other word suits you at present," Maud answered, seeing her advantage, and determined to press it forward. "You have allowed your peace and happiness to be utterly destroyed for the last three or four weeks by a mere phantom. Just turn your attention to getting rid of these constant headaches, and this incessant sleeplessness, and you will find all the rest disappear without any trouble."

"Oh, Maud! if I could only believe it."

"It is not of the slightest consequence whether you believe it or not. If you will only try, you will soon find out that it is quite true."

"But I wish you wouldn't speak so sharply. You might feel for me."

"Isabel," Maud answered, gravely, "you know quite well that, if you had any real trouble, or cause for unhappiness, I should be the first to feel for you; but I am not going to act in so contradictory a way as to tell you all this misery is purely imaginary and then treat you as I should do were it real."

"But supposing you are right, which, however, remember, I am by no means disposed to grant yet, what am I to say to Edgar?"

"Nothing at all, except that you were in a passion, and are very sorry."

"And Ross?"

"That's not quite so easy," replied Maud, thoughtfully. "If Ross has any idea what you thought, I don't think she will give you a chance of deciding; for I have very little doubt that she would refuse to remain an hour longer in your service. If not, I think I should advise you to find her another place, and let her go. I don't think you will ever feel quite comfortable again after this."

"Well, I will think about it; but mind, I don't mean to say I am at all convinced. I only want to be prepared any way for what may happen."

They talked on for some time, Mrs. Darryll becoming more quiet every moment, evidently really better for the morning's outburst, and not proof against Maud's powers. At last the luncheon bell rang.

"Luncheon time! Is it possible?" exclaimed Mrs. Darryll.

"It is, indeed," replied Maud. "How long do you suppose I have been here?"

"Not long, have you?"

"Exactly four hours. Four hours' hard talking, to get you out of a foolish fancy."

"Maud, I tell you again, I am not satisfied yet that it is so," Mrs. Darryll replied, in a very peremptory tone—a tone which, Maud knew well enough, betokened that she was trying to strengthen herself in some departing fancy.

"Very well, we will not discuss that now. One thing however I know, and that is, that this phantom is only dislodged to make room for a fresh one before very long if something is not done to get rid of the other bad signs. I shall send Dr. Marsh up to see you the moment he returns home."

"When is he coming?"

"On Friday; and now I shall go and send you up some luncheon."

"Oh, Maud! I can't eat."

"What, is that another symptom?" Maud asked.

"Yes. I haven't been able to eat anything scarcely for ever so long."

"Isabel! how could you be so mad as to let all this pass unnoticed?"

"I couldn't think about it. I was too wretched."

Maud went slowly downstairs, rather wondering what she should say to Edgar Darryll. She could not think it prudent, at present at least, to tell him what had happened. Certainly not until she had taken counsel with Dr. Marsh, as to what was to be done. The storm seemed to have blown over for the moment, but how soon might not another rise, and what would be the end of it all? Maud trembled to think of it. Truly, she thought, Mrs. Feversham had been right when she said Sir Guy was the most hopeful of the two. There seemed little hope that Mrs. Darryll's unhappy disposition could fail to produce much misery for her.

To Mr. Darryll's anxious enquiries about

Isabel, she only answered that she believed the morning's outburst had been chiefly caused by her health being more out of order than she chose to admit. She urged him to speak to Dr. Marsh himself, and, if he thought it desirable, to insist of her having further advice. His questions as to whether she had not found out any cause for Isabel's conduct that morning, she parried as best she could, and then went home, feeling rather tired herself with her morning's work.

"Why, Maud!" exclaimed the dean, "what have you been doing? You look quite tired out."

"So I am, papa," she replied, wearily. "Isabel is, or rather I hope I may now say, was, in one of her contradictory fits; so I have had to talk her round, and it really is tiring; it keeps one so thoroughly on the stretch."

"I wish most heartily she had never come to the priory," the dean replied.

"You must not say that, papa. I am sure it has been a good thing for her, and perhaps," she added with a smile, "I might not have been as happy as I am, if she had not."

The dean knew what his daughter meant, and knew also that on that subject they were not altogether agreed, so he said no more.

Mrs. Darryll was not Maud's only source of uneasiness. This was the very time that Guy was at Archerfield, and Maud did not quite like the tone of his letters. They betrayed quite enough to make her feel anxious for him, though not enough to show her how much cause for anxiety there was. Even the mere act of writing to her seemed to soothe him down to a great extent, and his letters did not betray one half the excitability which his life there was rousing; neither did she know, as Mrs. Wellwood did, the character of the house in which he was a guest. It would have been better had she done so, for then Sir Guy would never have gone there; her influence would have been quite enough for that. As it was, though a little anxious about him, she was not more alarmed than to feel rather pleased to hear that he was to leave Archerfield so soon, and to make her write him a long letter; which same letter caused Sir Guy, when he received it, sundry sharp stings of conscience, though not quite enough to make him resolve to leave Archerfield at once, which he was all the time inwardly conscious would have been his wisest course.

Maud was conscious of a certain sense of disappointment at all this, though she told herself

again and again that it was very unreasonable that she should feel disappointed; that she could not, and did not, expect anything else but that Guy's excitability would prove at times a source of anxiety to her; that all she could expect her influence over him to effect was to prevent it producing any very serious results; that to expect it to remove the danger entirely was perfectly absurd, and what she had, moreover, never dreamt of for a moment. All of which, though highly philosophical, she did not find very consolatory. Everything had seemed so bright since her engagement, that this little cloud, trifling as it seemed, appeared darker by contrast.

That there were "breakers ahead" at the priory, she could not for a moment doubt; and she was much more anxious just now about Isabel than about Guy; though, for the present, she hoped the danger was past. She derived some satisfaction from the evident proofs she had received that Mrs. Darryll's health was really in a more unsatisfactory state than she would allow, as that might in some measure account for her present frame of mind, and would certainly render her more susceptible of treatment. Maud fondly hoped her morning's work

at the priory had been effectual to soothe the present disturbance; but early the next morning she received an earnest entreaty from Isabel to come to her immediately. With a sigh Maud prepared to obey.

"What is the matter now, Isabel?" she asked.

Mrs. Darryll's only answer was a violent burst of tears.

"Oh, Maud!" she sobbed at last, "I am so miserable. I am sure my heart will break."

"But what's the matter?" Maud asked again.

"Edgar will never forgive me."

"What do you mean?" Maud said, in rather a startled tone.

"He is so angry," Mrs. Darryll continued, without noticing Maud's question; "and I am sure it was very natural to think so."

"Natural to think what? Isabel, if you want me to help you, you must really contrive to tell me what is the matter, for, at the present moment, I have not the slightest idea."

With some difficulty Maud succeeded in bringing Mrs. Darryll back to a rather more tranquil frame of mind, and to one enabling her to speak a little more coherently.

"Now," she said, "tell me what has happened."

"Well, Maud, after you went away yesterday, I did contrive to eat some luncheon, and then I fell fast asleep. I don't know how long it is, but weeks, I am sure, since I have slept so soundly. I didn't wake till close to dinner-time, and then I felt much better. I began to think over all you had been saying, and to think, too, that perhaps you were right after all, and I wrong; and then various little things began to occur to my mind to confirm my conviction that I was wrong, and I won't deny, Maud, that, as you prognosticated, I did feel rather ashamed of myself for having been so foolish. I rang for Ross, and I soon found it was all right with her; she had not the least suspicion of the truth; it was such a relief to me. Then I made up my mind that I would tell Edgar all about it in the evening."

"You don't mean that you did tell him, Isabel?"

"Yes, I did," Mrs. Darryll replied, her tears beginning to flow afresh; "and, oh Maud! he is so angry. I never saw Edgar in such a fury in my life. I did not know he could get into such a rage. He said such bitter things, and then

dashed out of the room, and I have not seen him since. It is too cruel of him. I am sure I have suffered enough without this."

"I do not see what else you could expect," Maud said; "did you expect Edgar not to care about it?"

"No, certainly not. I thought he would be very much vexed at my thinking so, and perhaps reproach me for not having spoken sooner, and so been saved all I have suffered the last few weeks; but that was all I expected."

Vexed and anxious as she felt, Maud could hardly repress a smile. How could she hope to pierce through Isabel's impenetrable shield of egotism?

"If the positions had been reversed, and it had been Edgar who had suspected you, Isabel, what would you have felt?"

"Maud!" exclaimed Mrs. Darryll, with flushing eyes, "how can you suggest such a thing?"

"Simply because I wish you to consider of it," Maud answered calmly; "if you feel so indignant at the bare suggestion, can you not see that Edgar's conduct was just what you might have expected? It certainly is exactly what I expected, and, for that reason, I recommended you not to tell him."

"But the two cases are quite different. It would have been simply monstrous for Edgar to think of such a thing. Now, I had some reason."

"That I entirely deny, and so, I know, would Edgar. So it seems to me that what you expect from your husband is that he should find himself most unjustly suspected, not only without any indignation, but with only a feeling of sympathy for the distress the idea has occasioned you. If you call that reasonable, I can only say I do not."

"Well, I cannot see it in that light at all," replied Mrs. Darryll; "I think it is very cruel of Edgar to take it in this way. It is very well for you to talk, Maud, but wait till you are Guy's wife, and then see what you would feel in the same circumstances."

"I can tell you that," Maud said, scornfully, "without waiting to be Guy's wife. If I ever did do such a thing as to suspect my husband causelessly, and he heard it without manifesting deep indignation, I should feel that I did not well know whether his conduct or my own were the more contemptible."

"That's all very well in theory, but practice is quite another thing, and so you will find."

"God forbid I ever should," Maud answered,

gravely; "but you have not told me yet what it is you want me to do."

"I want you to go and talk to Edgar, and see if you cannot talk him round."

"Thank you!" Maud exclaimed; "I had rather do no such thing. No, Isabel, I will do anything I can for you, but you must settle your own differences with your husband without my intervention."

"Oh, don't say that, dear Maud, please don't," Isabel pleaded; "I have depended entirely on you. You can say so much more than I can."

Maud hesitated. "I do not care," she said, "to interfere between husband and wife."

"But this is quite different. Do go and talk to him, I implore you."

Maud yielded at last, somewhat reluctantly, and went in search of Edgar Darryll.

"So you have come to an explanation," she said, plunging boldly into the subject.

"An explanation! I should think so," he replied bitterly, "and one that seems to have carried away the very ground from under my feet. Did you know this yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Simply because I didn't want you to know it at present. I advised Isabel to tell you nothing about it."

"That wasn't good advice."

"Yes it was, Edgar."

"It would have been just the same to me whenever I heard it."

"No, it would not. Things at a distance never do affect us as things close do."

"I don't believe it; however, it's no matter now. I do know it, and that's enough."

"Isabel is dreadfully unhappy, Edgar," Maud said, gently.

"I should think so," he replied.

"She is so distressed at your being so angry," Maud continued.

"What else could you expect, Maud?"

"Nothing, certainly," Maud replied; "I think your anger just and right, only you must not carry it too far."

"What do you expect me to do?" he asked.

"To forgive a very foolish wife, but who, after all, deserves, I believe, more pity than blame."

"Maud, I can't do that; at least not yet. You can't expect it of me. I'm really afraid to see or speak to her, for fear I should find out

the case is even worse than I know; for I am not, even now, quite clear what she really does suspect."

"Nor does she know herself. She has no definite suspicion. As I told you yesterday, her health, I am sure, is at the bottom of this chiefly, though I cannot deny that she is naturally inclined to be jealous; so you must not treat this as a cool and deliberate accusation against you. If you are afraid of erring, Edgar, choose the less error of the two, and be over-lenient rather than over-harsh. Isabel is bitterly punished already. You are so clearly not to blame, that you can afford to yield the point."

"It is very well for you to talk," he answered; "you are thinking only of Isabel; but you forget what this is to me. How can I ever feel certain the thing will not happen again?"

"You never can," she replied quietly.

"Exactly! And yet you expect me to pass it over as if it was nothing."

"Your refusing to do so won't alter your position, or lessen the change for the future."

"I know that quite well enough," he answered bitterly, "without your telling me; but that fact hasn't exactly a tendency to make me think more lightly of all this. It's not such a pleasant

thing to find out that at nine-and-twenty one is tied for life to a jealous woman."

"Edgar!" Maud exclaimed, "you must not speak in that way."

"Is it not perfectly true?" he said, looking up at her. "Come, Maud, I know you can't say what is not true, answer me. Don't you think at this moment I am entitled to some compassion for being Isabel Darryll's husband? Now, speak the truth."

Maud returned his look steadily, as she answered slowly, "I think, for your own sake, considering Isabel's very large fortune, you had better not speak of her in a way which would rather seem to imply that you have not a very deep affection for her."

A scarlet flush rose to his face, and he buried his face in his hands, saying, in a trembling voice, "That's a sharp cut, Maud."

"You asked for the truth."

"And got it, with a vengeance!" he answered, without raising his head.

"You needed a warning word," she said; "but don't think, Edgar," and she laid her hand gently on his shoulder, "that I don't feel for you. Only I don't want you to make bad worse. You must face your position boldly,

and make the best of it. There is much in your power if you will only act sensibly."

"It is very easy to decide for other people," he answered, "but wait till you are tried."

"Whenever I am, you shall see that I have not two different courses—one for myself, and one for others. You shall see that I will make the best of any position in which I may be placed. But now, like a dear good fellow, do as I want. Go to Isabel, and talk quietly to her; a serious remonstrance and warning from you will do her more good, in her present condition, than anything I can do or say."

He was not quite disposed to yield, but he did at last, to her gentle influence, and went up to Isabel's dressing-room. Her real distress and unfeigned penitence completed what Maud had begun, and made him very glad he had not resisted her entreaties; while his wife's description, in extenuation of what she readily enough now admitted to be her own utter folly, of her intense headaches, constant sleeplessness, and occasional depression of spirits, alarmed him enough to make him think this outburst perhaps more entirely the effect of disordered health than he had hitherto believed, and to raise his spirits accordingly.

Maud went home pretty well satisfied with her day's work; more than she would have been could she have seen one result thereof—a sudden contrast, in very vivid colours, which presented itself before Edgar Darryll's mind, between the wife he had and the wife he would have had, and which it was some time before he could entirely banish. She entered the deanery with something of the weary feeling of the day before, and rather congratulating herself that the dean was out for the whole day. She slowly entered the drawing-room, and started to find herself face to face with Doctor Marsh.

CHAPTER IX.

A TERRIBLE DISCLOSURE.

On the morning of the previous day, Doctor Marsh had arrived in London, on his way home from Paris, intending to spend two or three days there, before returning to Stowminster. He had no very particular object in so doing, but he thought it a sort of duty to spend a few days in London occasionally, and just see what was going on; though London, within a week of Christmas, did not seem a very cheerful sort of place.

As he was sauntering slowly down to his club, in search of breakfast, he unexpectedly met Frank Wellwood.

"Why, Doctor Marsh!" exclaimed Frank; "is that you? I had no idea you were in London."

"No more I was, till about two hours ago."

"Are you just come from Stowminster?"

"Certainly not. I am just come from Dover—came up by the early train this morning. I hav'nt been at Stowminster for more than two months. I went away, as I thought, for about a fortnight, and this is the end of it, thanks to an illness."

"Why, you don't look as if you had been ill."

"No more I have; but, you see, doctors are liable to have their arrangements overturned by other people's illnesses, even after they have given up practising."

"Ah, yes," Frank replied, in an absent tone; "what are you going to do with yourself?"

"Get some breakfast first, and then see what's to be seen. What's going on?"

"Nothing, that I know of; at least nothing worth seeing. I never knew London so dull, and such confounded weather too; it's enough to make a fellow deposit himself in the Serpentine. I do hate London in the winter."

"Hulloa, young man!" exclaimed Doctor Marsh, laughing, "you seem in a very despondent frame of mind. You were a deal more lively when I last saw you, flirting with your pretty cousin, at the ball at Riverston."

"Confound Riverston, and the ball too,"

replied Frank, sharply; "and Miss Lisle is not my cousin. It's very odd people will always fancy we are related."

The tone in which he spoke made Doctor Marsh look closer at him, and then he noticed how worn and haggard he was looking, and how different from his usual appearance.

"I suppose," he replied gravely, "it is because of the connection between your families; but as you say there is nothing doing, I suppose your engagements are not very numerous. Will you come and dine with me, this evening, at my club?"

"With the greatest pleasure," Frank replied, "though I'm afraid you won't find me a very gay companion," he added, with a sigh.

"Never mind about that. I'm not apt to be afflicted with dullness myself, so I can generally cheer any one else up."

Frank smiled grimly, thinking that Doctor Marsh would find it a hard task to cheer him up, and went off, to write the very letter which Pauline received the day Sir Guy Rivers dined at Riverston vicarage; while Doctor Marsh proceeded to his club, to breakfast, determining to find out, in the evening, what was wrong. Other people's troubles did not sit

lightly on his genial kindly nature; more especially, when he did not know enough of the nature, to feel sure it might not be in his power to lighten them. "I shouldn't wonder," he said to himself, "if that young fellow has got into debt, a very likely thing to happen. Well, I must see to that."

The dinner was not very cheerful, certainly. Frank exerted himself to talk, but the attempt was not a very successful one.

"Now then, youngster," Doctor Marsh said, as soon as the wine was on the table, "I want to know what is the matter with you."

"With me, doctor? nothing, I can assure you."

"My dear Wellwood, you should always speak the truth; particularly when it is not the least use to do otherwise. I never saw a fellow so down in the mouth in my life. Now I don't want to pry into your affairs, but I can't bear to see people unhappy, and I've always had an idea, that the special province of old men in this world, is to help young ones; so if you are in any trouble, in which I could help you, let me hear what it is, and trust me you shall have no cause to regret it. You needn't be afraid, you know. I can remember the time when I was a

young fellow, myself, though I am such an old grandfather now."

"You're very kind, I'm sure," Frank replied in a slightly tremulous tone, "but I'm afraid you couldn't help me, though I'm very grateful to you, all the same."

"Will you let me judge of that?" said Doctor Marsh, kindly.

Frank hesitated. There was something very fascinating about Doctor Marsh. He was the recipient of more confidences than most men, and turned them to better account, too; and Frank's burden was a very heavy one to him. It almost seemed as if to speak would be a relief, and so, before long, Doctor Marsh had heard the whole story of his love.

How the good old man's heart ached as he listened. If there was one girl, among all his acquaintance, of whom he had a lower opinion than of any other, it was Pauline Lisle. He knew a good deal about her proceedings, far more than Frank did, and had thoroughly fathomed her. And this was the girl to whom the honest, truthful, high principled young fellow, sitting opposite to him, had given his whole heart, with a depth of affection, which any woman might have coveted. Frank spoke

quietly enough; there was no sentimentality about him, but every word told, with the simple pathos of truth, and Doctor Marsh did feel that Frank had been right in saying he could not help him. It certainly would not do to tell him either his opinion of Pauline, or what he believed to be the motives of her conduct; and so he did not speak when Frank had finished his story.

"Do you wonder now that I'm rather dull, doctor?" he asked.

"No, indeed I do not, Wellwood; and in truth, I must say, I don't think Miss Lisle has treated you well."

"No, don't say that. She doesn't know what a trial it has been to me, or she is far too gentle and kind to have laid it on me."

"Humph!" said Doctor Marsh, "kind or not kind, I still can only repeat my opinion. It was not fair."

"But it was my own choice."

"Yes, after a fashion, but she ought to have let you have a decided answer long 'ere this."

"I certainly did think she would," Frank replied, "but I can't blame her. "Yet, somehow, lately, I have got to feel very despondent

about it altogether. However, I shall know something certain very soon now," he added, with a heavy sigh.

"I only wish I could help you," Doctor Marsh said, "but I'm afraid your malady is beyond my skill."

"You have helped me already, doctor, by listening so kindly to all this," Frank replied, gratefully. "It's not every one has the patience to listen to a story of that kind; or to whom one cares to tell it—but we've had enough of that. I suppose as you have been away from Stowminster so long, you havn't heard the rumours that are flying about."

"Rumours? no, I've heard none. What do you mean?"

"Why, there's a report about, in the county, that Sir Guy Rivers is engaged to Miss Vernon, but ——"

Frank Wellwood's speech came to an untimely end, for Doctor Marsh started up, and banging his hand down on the table, exclaimed—

"It's a lie!"

"Doctor!" said Frank, and then paused in speechless astonishment.

"I didn't mean anything personal, my dear fellow," Doctor Marsh said. "I meant the

report was a lie. It can't be true," he added, in a tone of intense anxiety, "it surely can't be true."

"Well, I don't know, I should think it was very likely. I do know this, for certain, that Miss Vernon has been over at Riverston hall, with Sir Guy and Mrs. Darryll, and that Sir Guy was consulting her about all he is doing there."

"Oh, surely it cannot be true," Doctor Marsh repeated. "What could the dean be about? He would surely never have failed me."

This speech was rather enigmatical to Frank, so he only remarked, "You do not seem pleased at the report."

"Pleased!" exclaimed Doctor Marsh, rising, and pacing restlessly backwards and forwards across the end of the room; "I should think not. But I won't believe it."

"I should have thought you would have rather liked the idea, as Miss Vernon is such a favourite of yours. It will be a splendid marriage for her."

"A splendid marriage!" repeated Doctor Marsh. "Talk about something you do understand, my dear fellow. I do love that girl as if she was my own child; she's a noble creature,

but I tell you I'd rather see her in her grave than married to Guy Rivers."

"Why on earth should you object?"

"For reasons best known to myself," Doctor Marsh answered, shortly.

"I always thought Sir Guy Rivers such a fine fellow," Frank said, "except"—— he paused.

"So he is," Doctor Marsh replied. "A finer fellow and a better disposition at heart, never lived. Poor fellow! poor fellow! I wonder what she will do."

He continued his restless walk for some minutes in silence, as if lost in anxious thought, then, suddenly stopping, he said—

"This alters my plans, Wellwood. I shall go down to Stowminster by the first train tomorrow morning. Would to heaven I had never left it. But I can't believe it. At any rate, whether the report is true or not, don't let it be known that I have expressed any disapproval; and now, good night. You have sorely disturbed me with this piece of gossip. Heaven grant it may prove nothing more, and you must leave me to think it over."

Frank wished him good night, and departed, greatly wondering at his conduct, and Doctor

Marsh went off to his hotel, and, in his bedroom, resumed his restless pacing up and down, and continued it till long past midnight, accompanied by occasional muttered exclamations, indicative of great mental disturbance.

He reached Stowminster early the next day, to the great astonishment, and no small discomfiture, of his housekeeper.

"Lor, sir!" she exclaimed, "I never dreamed of your coming before Friday. And the curtains ain't up, nor nothing ready."

"Confound the curtains," was all Doctor Marsh's answer. "Go and get me some luncheon, like a good old soul."

The woman retired, wondering what had come to her master. Doctor Marsh entered the dining-room, and hastily turned over a pile of letters and papers lying on the table. Among them was the dean's letter. Doctor Marsh tore it open, read it hastily, and then rang the bell furiously. His man appeared.

"Why was not this letter from the dean forwarded?" Doctor Marsh asked, angrily.

"Letter from the dean, sir!" repeated the man.

"Yes, blockhead. It was of the utmost consequence I should have received it directly, and

here it has been lying for weeks. It must have come very soon after I left."

"Oh, yes, I remember now, sir; it is so long, I had forgotten. The man who brought it down said the dean had especially desired it should not be forwarded."

"Fool! idiot!" muttered Doctor Marsh, between his clenched teeth. "You can go," he added, aloud. "It almost looks as if the hand of Providence was in this," he said to himself, as the door closed. Then he sat down, read the dean's letter again, and fairly groaned.

He was sitting with his face buried in his hands when his luncheon was brought in. And when, a little while after, hearing him leave the house, the servant went into the room, it was still untouched, and much speculation followed in the kitchen as to what on earth had come to "master."

With a hasty step Doctor Marsh strode off to the deanery, determined to do something, though hardly resolved what, and rather waiting for circumstances to decide.

"Is the dean at home?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"When will he be?"

"Not till quite late, sir; he dines out."

"Is Miss Vernon at home?"

"She's up at the priory just now, sir; but we expect her in every moment."

"I'll wait then," Doctor Marsh answered, crossing the hall towards the drawing-room, where he had not been many minutes when Maud appeared, on her return from her mission of reconciliation.

"Oh, Doctor Marsh!" she exclaimed, advancing with both hands extended, "I never was so glad to see you before. I thought you were not coming till Friday."

"No more I was; but something I heard in London brought me down."

Maud looked up in some surprise and a little alarm. He was still holding her hand in his own, and was looking at her with an earnest, questioning, almost pitying look, while his tone was grave, even to sadness.

"You look as if the news had been bad," she said; "I hope it is not so."

"It is indeed," he answered. "It was only a doubtful rumour I heard in London, but I have had it fully confirmed since I arrived at home, and that confirmation lays on me the bitterest task, I think, has ever fallen to my lot."

Maud grew very pale. Something in his

manner brought a sickening feeling of dread over her. "What do you mean?" she asked, in a low tone.

Doctor Marsh hesitated. It was a hard task to tell what he had to tell. How hard he had scarcely had time fully to realise, till he stood there face to face with the girl he loved so dearly, and to whom he had to deal so terrible a blow. But it must be done, and done at once. "I have to tell you what will be a sore trial to you to hear, my child," he said. "Sit down," he added, seeing the sudden tremor that passed over her as he spoke.

Maud obeyed, and her hand closed convulsively on the arm of the couch, but she only said—

"What about?"

"About Guy Rivers."

"Was that what you heard in London?" she asked, with a crimson flush succeeding the pallor his first words had caused.

"Yes."

"Who told you?"

"Frank Wellwood, and I find it confirmed by a letter from the dean, waiting for me at home."

"And is that such very bad news?" she asked, with a slight shade of displeasure in her tone.

"Very bad indeed to me," he answered.

"What have you to say against Guy?" Maud asked.

"Nothing against Guy Rivers," he answered, "but everything against your becoming his wife. He is, at heart, as noble, high principled a fellow as I have ever seen in my life, and yet —— Maud Vernon, I have known and loved you from the time you were an infant; but I would rather, I think, have heard that you were in your grave."

His words seemed almost cruel, but Doctor Marsh knew what he was doing, and with whom he had to do. No cautious approaching could soften the blow he had to deal. The sooner what he had to say was said, the better, and the kinder. Maud was very pale again now, and he felt her tremble, but she said quietly—

"Explain what you mean."

"You know, well enough, the peculiarities of both Sir Guy Rivers and Mrs. Darryll. The wild excitability and occasional causeless bursts of temper in the one, the morbid egotism and equally causeless jealousy and suspicion of the other. Has it never occurred to you to wonder what was the cause of all this?"

"I have done so often and vainly," Maud answered. "I never could trace any cause beyond a neglected education."

"Would to God that were all," Doctor Marsh said.

"For heaven's sake speak plainly," Maud said, sharply. "I know something dreadful is coming. I can bear anything better than suspense."

"Did it never occur to you to think of another cause than that?" He paused a moment; he could see she was nerving herself to stand firm, and then added, in a lower tone, "A possible inheritance."

For an instant Maud looked at him with a bewildered, questioning look, as if she could not in the least fathom his meaning; then suddenly the colour rushed over her face again, and as suddenly fled, leaving her not simply pale, but absolutely ghastly, and her eyes dilated with a strange look of horror. "You mean," she gasped, in a choking voice which failed her with the words—

"*Insanity*," said Doctor Marsh.

With a short, sharp cry of pain Maud sprang to her feet, and stood gazing at Doctor Marsh, with a perfectly livid face, and eyes fixed, and

with every limb rigid, only an occasional strong shudder passing over her. For a moment Dr. Marsh was terrified. It really seemed as if the blow was mortal.

"Maud! Maud! my poor child," he said, "you must not think it worse than it is. Mind, I only said a possible inheritance."

"A possible inheritance," she repeated, almost mechanically, in a low, hollow tone. "Oh, Guy! Guy!"

The sound of his name seemed to break the spell, and suddenly dropping on her knees, she buried her face in the cushions of the couch on which she had been sitting, and sobbed convulsively.

Doctor Marsh felt as if a mountain had been lifted off him. The violence of the tempest that shook her now, would have terrified him at any other time, but anything was better than the still more terrible calm which had preceded it. He neither moved nor spoke, until she grew a little quieter, and then, putting his arm round her, he gently raised her and placed her on the couch. She was perfectly passive. If anything had been wanting to tell Doctor Marsh how even her strong nature had reeled under the blow which had fallen, he would have found it

in the utter helpless prostration, expressed in every line of face and figure, so absolute a contrast to the usual appearance of firmness which characterised her. But though the good doctor's heart bled for her, he felt no fear now. He knew she would rally, though the struggle might be a sore one.

"Wait for me a moment," he said, and then left the room, and rang the library bell.

"I have some business to settle with Miss Vernon," he said to the footman, "so she is not at home, if any visitors should call."

The man disappeared, and Doctor Marsh returned to the drawing-room. There he sat down quietly and waited, leaving Maud to speak or not, as she chose. She lay quiet for a little time, and then rising, she said—"I am better, I can bear it now. Tell me all."

"Would it not be better another time? This has been a cruel stab for you."

"Cruel!" she repeated. "None can tell how cruel, save—" she added, as if speaking to herself, "He whose hand has dealt the blow, and who alone can send the strength to bear it. What was it you said?—better another time? No, tell me all now. Now I know so much, I would rather hear all. Tell me everything.

But first answer me a question. Why did you never tell me this, until too late?"

It sounded almost like a reproach, and Doctor Marsh felt it keenly.

"Would to God I could have done so, he said. You little know what it has cost me to keep silent; but all I know I learned professionally, therefore my lips were sealed. But for the fact of my attending Lady Clara Rivers, I should never have known this terrible secret. But don't think I intended my reticence should have gone so far as this. Do you not know the promise I got from your father?"

"Yes, I have heard of it since."

"It was with a view to this I acted. Had I seen the least thing to make me think there was even the most distant chance of Sir Guy seeking to win you, I should have considered myself quite justified in breaking the silence. You know in how extraordinary a way my design has been frustrated."

"Yes, I understand now. You have acted quite rightly. But now tell me everything you know, and then you must answer some more questions for me."

"The first time I ever saw Lady Clara," Doctor Marsh said, "was soon after her mar-

riage, and then I noticed one or two trifling symptoms which made me feel rather uneasy, when, shortly after, Sir Rupert called on me, and told me that Lady Clara was expecting the birth of her first child, and that he wished I should attend her. I visited her two or three times, and soon saw quite enough to make me feel that I must have more information; so I boldly put the question to Sir Rupert, whether there was, or was not, any insanity in Lady Clara Rivers' family; giving him my reasons for the question. He was terribly distressed, evidently, by the question, and said he feared there was, but had never dared to ask; but rumours had got about, at the time of Lady Bellingham's death, that she had shown some alarming symptoms. I told him it was of importance I should have more decided information. Sir Rupert answered that that could, he thought, easily be obtained, for Lady Clara's maid—Mrs. Parsons, you know, who was a daughter of one of Lord Bellingham's tenantry—had just gone to Lady Bellingham as maid when Lady Clara was born; and could probably tell all about it, and was moreover thoroughly trustworthy. The woman was sent for—and I shall never forget the scene that followed. Sir

Rupert explained to her what was wanted, and told her that probably her lady's welfare depended on her answering truly, and then the truth came out. Parsons was dreadfully overcome, but spoke openly enough. Lady Bellingham was raving mad from the time of Lady Clara's birth, and committed suicide in one of the paroxysms. Lord Bellingham had had the greatest difficulty in preventing the fact becoming public. Parsons admitted, too, that at various times, Lady Clara herself had been a source of great anxiety; but she had never dreamed that Sir Rupert did not know all that when he married her. I never saw a man so overcome as Sir Rupert was. I asked Parsons if she could trace the disease any further. She said she had heard that Bellingham's grandmother had died in confinement, but she could not answer for the truth of the story. Of course, there was nothing to be done, save to take every possible precaution; and though Lady Clara was in a very alarming state for some little time after Sir Guy's birth, we contrived to get her through safely. I warned Sir Rupert then, that he must never oppose her forcibly about anything upon which she was very determined, or got very excited, or I

would not be answerable for the consequences. He treated her admirably, and though I believe at times he had a great deal of trouble, they got on, on the whole, very fairly. His devotion to her was beyond anything I ever saw.

"I was very uneasy about her, when Mrs. Darryll's birth was expected. The symptoms were more alarming than previously, and, as I fully expected, all precautions were useless; and for a few weeks, soon after the infant's birth, Lady Clara was absolutely insane, and had to be moved from home. She rallied however, most wonderfully, and recovered in a far shorter time than I had dared to hope; and seemed, then, in very much better health, both mental and physical, than I had ever seen her. But then came the terrible catastrophe. I had not seen her for some little time previously, but I have no doubt she had been going back before then, from all I heard afterwards. In fact, the very day before she was killed, I met Mrs. Feversham in Stowminster, and she told me she had not liked Lady Clara's looks at the ball, the night before. There seemed more of her old excitability about her, than she had seen for some time. The next thing I heard, I was summoned, as hastily as

uselessly, to the farmhouse where her mangled corpse was lying. Now you know all, and I only would you had done so long ago."

Maud had listened without a word, and with only an occasional shudder, to Doctor Marsh's story, and she still remained silent for a time. At last she said quietly, but with a slight tremour in her voice—

"So much for the past. Now we must turn to the future. First, let me tell you all I know, and then you must tell me exactly what you think, of both Guy and Isabel; and mind, doctor," she added, laying her hand on his arm, and looking up in his face with intense earnestness, "you must tell me the whole truth, even though you should believe it would kill me as I sit here; or I hold you for ever responsible for the consequences. Do you promise?"

"I promise," Doctor Marsh answered.

Then Maud told him all. All Guy's strange thoughts and fancies; and how they had seemed to lose their hold on him, since his engagement to her; and of the marvellous power she had over him. Then all about Isabel; her present state, and all her own anxieties about her. She told it all, calmly and distinctly, and without

wavering once; but the short sharp sentences, and the occasional catching of her breath, told the calmness only lay on the surface, kept there by a strong will. Doctor Marsh listened, with the deepest attention, and Maud, who was watching him all the time, could not help fancying that his face brightened a little as she spoke of Guy; though it grew very grave as she told about Isabel.

"Now," she said, when she had finished, "you know all that I can tell you; and I think that is as much as they could, and a great deal more than they would, tell you themselves. Tell me now, exactly what you think of the state of each."

Doctor Marsh hesitated; the question was a difficult one to answer. He almost began to repent the promise he had made, to tell the truth; for that truth, with respect to Guy, simply amounted to this: that there would be every hope for him if Maud would still consent to become his wife; but absolutely none if she could not resolve to run the risk. Yet how could he tell her that? was it not almost urging her to do the very thing he most dreaded to see her do? Like a coward he put off the evil moment, and said—

"What you tell me of Mrs. Darryll is very, very bad. Of course you must understand that I don't speak professionally; but, privately, I should think, from what you say, that there is very little chance for her; though how long the evil may be staved off must depend upon circumstances which it is impossible to foresee. From my own professional observations, I always feared most for her. Is there any prospect of her having any family?"

"Not the slightest, at present," Maud answered. "She was congratulating herself on the subject the other day, for she says she would much rather have no children."

"Poor thing!" Doctor Marsh said, with a sigh. "I fear there is little hope for her, but I will see her directly myself."

"And now about Guy," Maud said, with a little convulsive motion of her hands.

Again Doctor Marsh hesitated, though he felt it was cruel to do it. Maud scanned his face closely for a moment, and then, with rather a sickly smile, she said—

"Shall I tell you what you think?"

"Aye do," he said.

"You think Guy far the most hopeful of the two at the present moment, but that all his

chances would be over if I drew back; and you do not like to tell me so, because you, personally, would rather I should draw back. Is it not so?"

"Exactly," replied Dr. Marsh.

"Then you need not fear," Maud said. "My decision on that point is unalterably fixed already. Nothing that you can say would alter it."

"Surely you are not wise to decide so hastily," Doctor Marsh exclaimed.

"You don't wait to hear what the decision is, then?"

"I am certain of that already."

"How so?"

"You could not, in so short a time, have irrevocably decided to cast off Guy Rivers."

Maud smiled. "And you think I ought to have taken time to consider whether I would coolly and deliberately visit a terrible calamity on an innocent head, and doom the man I love to ruin, or run a risk where there is every prospect that by so doing I may save him. Nay, doctor, you know that in this instance, at least, in doing what my head dictates I am doing what every sound heart would approve. If this fearful malady were, or ever had been, actually developed, the case would be quite different, or had I

known of this when first I knew Sir Guy; but, as the case stands, there is no subject even for consideration. Nothing but wilful misconduct on Guy's part could free me from the promise I gave him. This is a terrible blow to me, how terrible I can hardly realise yet myself, but it does not in the least affect my position."

"Are you prepared for all that may lie before you?" Doctor Marsh asked.

"Yes, I think for all. I know that from this day forward my life must be one of constant and wearing anxiety; that I shall, in fact, have to live, till death removes it, with a sword suspended over my head. That I shall never know perfect peace again, and that I may be called upon to pass through the fiercest furnace of affliction a woman can be called upon to pass through; to bear a burden, the full weight of which, I suppose, none can realise save those who have borne it. And, even more," she added in a lower tone, and with a slight flush coming back to her face again for a moment; "I know that I may have to incur the responsibility of transmitting an hereditary taint. How say you, doctor, am I prepared or not?"

"You are, indeed," he said.

"Then," Maud replied, "all that, and even

more, if necessary, I am prepared to bear for the sake of Guy Rivers, and in the firm conviction that I am doing right. I leave my whole future life in the hands of God. His holy will be done."

Doctor Marsh said nothing. What could he be, but silent, in the presence of so great a love, and so firm a faith?

Maud was silent too, for a time, and then she said—"You are an old, a true, and a wise friend, doctor. I should like to know what you think. Am I right?"

"Most undoubtedly I think you are," he answered, unhesitatingly, "though I dare not have urged you to such a decision."

"I am glad you think so; but now there is one thing more. Not a word of this to papa. No, indeed, you must not tell him," she continued, seeing Doctor Marsh was about to remonstrate; "it is much better he should not know it."

"But I doubt whether I am justified in withholding the knowledge from the dean," Doctor Marsh said.

"Yes, indeed, you are. Surely no one has so much right to a voice in this, as I myself. I know papa's decision would be the same as mine,

therefore why burden his declining years with so heavy a load of anxiety? Even should evil spring from this, it is very probable it may not come in his lifetime. Indeed, dear Doctor Marsh, you must let me have my own way in this."

Doctor Marsh assented, rather reluctantly—"But how then am I to account to the dean for my conduct?"

"Simply say that what you have heard, since he made that promise, makes you think it an unnecessary one, and leave him in ignorance of the unforwarded letter."

"And how do you mean to account to him for that pale face and those dark lines under the eyes?" Doctor Marsh asked.

"Ah! I had forgotten about that," she answered. "You see I am not a practised deceiver; but, under any circumstances, I should not see him again to-night, and by to-morrow I hope there will be nothing more to account for than I can manage."

"I doubt it," Doctor Marsh replied. "The dean's eyes are sharp where you are concerned."

"Poor papa!" Maud said. "Oh, I am so glad he does not know. But now, doctor, you

must tell me all I ought to do, and all Guy ought not to do. I don't much understand such cases."

"Not to-day," Doctor Marsh answered. "You have had enough, and more than enough, for one day, Heaven knows.

"Yes, to-day, and now," Maud said, firmly; "and then let this fearful subject, at least as far as Guy is concerned, rest for ever, unless I introduce it. I can bear my load, but I cannot talk about it."

"There is not very much to say," Doctor Marsh replied. "You do, unconsciously apparently, all that can be done, by exercising so great an influence over Guy Rivers."

"Yes, I know that, I understand that much. Guy's terrible excitability is of course the great danger with him, and that is the very thing my influence over him seems to hold in check, but I want to know more than that. Supposing he were exposed to great and long-continued excitement, what would the result be?"

"That would depend a great deal upon the circumstances in which he was placed. The effect of long-continued excitement would be to make him lose all self-command; and when a man has lost that, who can answer for what he

may do? What I should fear would be—" he hesitated.

"Go on," Maud said. "Consider, for the moment, that I have no feelings"—a suggestion rendered very useless by the nervous clasping together of her hands as she spoke.

"I should fear that ardent spirits would finish the business," Doctor Marsh continued. "All you can do is soon told. You must strive to keep him as much as possible from excitement of any kind. When is the marriage to take place?"

"Not before next October. Papa would not sanction it sooner."

"He was quite right, how right he did not know. If Guy stands that, I think, with you for his wife, he is tolerably safe."

"If he stands it," Maud repeated. Doctor Marsh did not know how strongly he had emphasised the words. "Do you not think he will?"

"It is impossible to say. Any delay of that kind is a certain source of irritation to an impetuous temperament like his; but if he does, it will be a very good sign. Where is he now?"

"I think at Riverston. He has been staying at Archerfield; but I had a few lines from him a few days since, saying he should leave there

either yesterday or to day, and probably come over for a day, before going to the Fevershams."

"I'm very sorry to hear he has been at Archerfield," Doctor Marsh said, gravely.

"Why?"

"It is a bad place for him."

"So I feared," Maud answered, anxiously. "I don't like the way he has written since he was there. However, that is over now. He is certain to be back at Riverston by this time, I think."

She leaned her head back, and closed her eyes with a heavy sigh as she spoke.

Doctor Marsh looked at her in silence. So firm and quiet. Could it be her strong will that kept her so? or was it that the weight of the blow had stunned her for the moment? He hardly knew which to believe, until, as he thought of all she might be called on to hear, he said in a low tone, almost unconsciously—"God help you, my poor child!" Then his mind was made up on that point. With a sudden shiver Maud started up.

"Doctor," she exclaimed, "you mustn't speak like that, I can't bear it. You must treat me exactly as if nothing was the matter, or I shall

break down altogether. Don't think me unfeeling, but ——"

She paused, and her face worked convulsively.

Doctor Marsh finished the sentence, "You will be better alone," he said gravely, rising and holding out his hand. Maud held it with a grateful pressure for a moment, and then said—

"You will see Isabel the first thing to-morrow, will you not?"

"Certainly I will."

"And then let me know what you think of her. Tell her that I am not quite well, and cannot see her to-morrow; but, for Heaven's sake! don't let her come near me," she added hastily.

"I shall give my own orders," Doctor Marsh said, smiling, and then he wished her good-bye, with just his ordinary manner; a shade graver, perhaps, than usual, nothing more. Maud could have blessed him for his perfect tact and full appreciation of the fact, that to her at that moment, while words could have been far below the value of silver, silence was above that of gold.

The winter dusk was falling as Doctor Marsh walked home, alone with his oft repeated regrets, that Maud Vernon and Guy Rivers had ever met. Maud's decision too, as to her own conduct, rather perplexed him; not so much

with regard to the decision itself, in that he fully admitted she was perfectly right, bitterly as he regretted all that had happened, but with regard to her motives for that decision. Had she really, as she appeared to have done, decided from a clear perception, even amid all the distress his terrible communication had caused her, of what was right? Or was it only that her deep love for Guy Rivers had overpowered every other feeling, and led her to determine to face everything rather than give him up? Doctor Marsh felt a little dread on this point; as, in the latter case, the feeling which had accidently led her to a right decision now, might, under altered circumstances, lead her to a wrong one. Still, as he thought over all that had passed, his admiration for her deepened, and his conviction grew stronger, that, married to her, Guy Rivers would be comparatively safe. Only, would the marriage ever take place? A doubt on the subject did, for a moment, cross Doctor Marsh's mind, though he thought it seemed rather an absurd one, considering how well Guy had contrived to go on as yet. If Doctor Marsh could have known all that was passing in some minds, or have seen Guy Rivers at that moment preparing to dine

at Riverston vicarage, the doubts he thought so unreasonable would very rapidly have grown into very serious forebodings.

For long after Doctor Marsh was gone, Maud lay back upon the couch without moving, save now and then to wipe away a large tear which would slowly gather and roll down her face. What a change a few hours had wrought! That morning she would have said there were few in this world whose prospects for their future lives were brighter than hers; and now in the falling twilight she sat there, in the full consciousness that whatever her outer life might be in the future, the inner one must ever be to live alone in the chilling shadow of a great calamity. But not for a single moment did she shrink from her fate, even then, in all the bitterness of her first consciousness of it. Love was stronger than the possibility of even worse than death. Only when at last she rose and moved about, she was very pale, and there was a quiet subdued stillness about her, like that which comes over a house where death has entered. And death had in truth entered there, though there was no darkened room, no gloomy coffin; for the happy, peaceful, untried life which had until so lately been Maud Vernon's, was dead for ever.

CHAPTER X.

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW LIFE.

MAUD'S first look in her glass, the next morning, brought back to her mind Dr. Marsh's question. How was she to account to her father for her pale face, and the dark lines of suffering under her eyes? She hoped something from the dull gloomy morning, and from a little judicious attention to her position with respect to the light; but still she knew she must be prepared for some questioning, and she dreaded the ordeal. The necessity of, to a certain extent, deceiving her father, was not the least trying part of the new life on which she had so suddenly entered, and for which, as yet, she felt so little prepared. Nothing could have nerved her for it but her deep affection for him. Infinitely would she have preferred to have told him all, and leaned on him for support under her heavy burden.

But not for a single instant did she dream of following such a course. She knew his high sense of honour would force him to approve her decision, while, at the same time, it would almost break his heart to do so; and that, knowing all she knew, to give the consent to her marriage, which yet he would feel he could not withhold, would be more bitter to him than words could tell; and not one moment's anxiety, she was determined, should fall to his share, if she could prevent it, however great the relief it might bring to herself. Still it was with something almost like a guilty feeling that she descended the stairs when the prayer bell rang. With a desperate effort at cheerfulness she entered the library, and apparently with a partially successful one, for the dean said nothing beyond wishing her good morning. But the moment the servants had left the room, he turned to her.

"Maud, you are looking very pale. What is the matter?"

"I am very anxious and uneasy, papa," Maud replied.

"What about, my child?"

"About Isabel," Maud answered.

"Why, I thought that was all right for the present."

"So did I, but it seems I was wrong," and then she told him all that had happened the day before, making the most of the story, and of her anxiety at the feelings it had roused in Edgar Darryll's mind.

"But, my dear Maud," her father said, after listening silently to her account, "I think it is very foolish of you to allow all this to weigh so heavily on your mind. If a foolish, bad-tempered woman chooses to get jealous and quarrel with her husband, why should you worry yourself about it?"

"I cannot help it in this case, papa. Isabel leans so on me, I feel almost responsible, in some measure, for what she does; and then, you know," she added, with, the dean thought, a strange tremor in her voice, "she is Guy's sister, though there is so little affection between them."

"Exactly," replied the dean. "If it were not so I would soon settle the business."

Maud did not care to ask how. "At any rate," she said, "it will not be so trying to me now. Doctor Marsh is come back."

"What! already?"

"Yes; he came rather unexpectedly, yesterday," Maud answered, bending low over her breakfast arrangements. "I saw him in the

afternoon, and he promised he would see Isabel this morning, and let me know what he thinks about her. I shall throw all my responsibilities, in that quarter, on him in future, for I really believe disordered health has a great deal to do with Isabel's fancies."

"I wish to goodness she would contrive to get her health into order again," the dean said, in a tone which certainly betokened no very lively sympathy with Mrs. Darryll's ailments, as he gathered up his papers and letters, and went off to his study, leaving Maud, for the first time in her life, immensely relieved by his departure. Would it always be so now? she sadly wondered, or should she in time get accustomed even to this part of her burden?

She listened anxiously all the morning for Doctor Marsh, but it was nearly luncheon time before he came; and then the expression of his face was not encouraging.

"Have you seen her?" Maud asked.

"I have. I have been there for nearly three hours, during almost the whole of which time Mrs. Darryll was then engaged in talking about herself; so I am pretty well acquainted with all her symptoms."

"I am so glad," Maud answered. "I was

rather afraid she would not tell you all that had happened."

"My dear Miss Maud, could you imagine that your devoted friend would let slip such a favourable opportunity for a long talk about herself?"

Maud smiled—a very shadowy smile. "But what do you think of her?" she asked.

Doctor Marsh shook his head. "I think," he said, "for the moment, this outburst—which, in passing, let me say, you have managed with a skill which would have done credit to far greater experience—has carried off the danger; but all she tells me is very bad. I drew her on to tell me a great deal about her past life, and for years she has had bad symptoms about her."

"But do you think she is getting worse?"

"I fear so. Some of the symptoms have certainly become more alarming of late."

"Oh, Doctor Marsh!" Maud said.

He started at her tone. Absorbed in the thought of all he had heard that morning, he had, for the moment, almost forgotten with what tenfold weight his words must fall on Maud now.

"You must not put too strong a construction on my words," he said, gently. "Remember,

as yet Mrs. Darryll has had no sort of treatment, and I hope much from that."

"Do you think her mind in positive danger at this moment?" Maud asked, firmly. "Tell me exactly what you think."

"I don't think she is in danger if she is left quiet; but her nervous system is in so unsatisfactory a state that, did any unforeseen circumstance produce any violent excitement of that jealousy and suspicion which is her evident tendency, I would not be answerable for what the consequences might be. But I hope there is no great danger of that. It could only come either through her husband or yourself; and I don't see much chance of it in either quarter. I have been talking to him about it."

"You have not——" Maud paused abruptly.

"Told him? No. But I have told him she is in a nervous unsatisfactory state, and needs care; and that as she is evidently naturally jealous, that is a point to be guarded. But, to tell you the truth, I don't think the danger with him would really be so great as with yourself. Her morbid devotion to you seems to me even stronger than ever, if that is possible."

"I know it is, and I am afraid that is a bad sign, is it not?"

"It is a dangerous one, certainly. But I hope there is no likelihood of her jealousy being roused, just at present at least, to a very dangerous point, for I think it would need some external aid to produce that. I have succeeded in getting her to promise to let me take her into my hands, for a time, and I hope much from that. In fact I little doubt that, if nothing very unforeseen happens, I shall be able to bring her into a much more satisfactory state of health in a few months. But I wish I could get her away from here, for a little, both for her own sake and yours."

"Why can you not?"

"Oh," replied Doctor Marsh, impatiently, "it is the same cry whenever I urge it. 'No, I can't be separated from Maud.' So I let the subject rest for the present."

"I think I might manage it for you in a short time."

"How so?"

"Papa and I are engaged to pay some visits shortly, which would take us away for a few weeks, and then, I dare say, she would consent to go. Guy is going down to the north, before very long, on business, and then I thought of

proposing to papa that we should fulfil our engagements."

"That would do admirably," Doctor Marsh replied.

"Very well," Maud said, though in rather a listless tone, "I will talk to papa about it directly."

"And now," he said, "tell me how you are?"

"You are disobeying orders," Maud replied.

"I must do it, so far, in my professional character. I will not step beyond that, without your leave."

"I hardly know myself how I am," she said. "I only know that I feel a great deal older than I did yesterday morning."

"Did you sleep?"

"Yes, heavily, for some hours, and then I wished I had not."

"Why?" asked Doctor Marsh, rather taken by surprise; and then he would have given anything to call back the question. Maud flushed suddenly, and her lip quivered, as she answered in a trembling voice—"It was so dreadful to wake again," and then the rush of feeling the answer brought overmastered her, and her hardly-maintained composure gave way entirely for a few moments. It was but

on the surface, after all. She soon recovered herself again, however.

"Forgive me for the thoughtless question," Doctor Marsh said, steadying his own voice with difficulty.

"There is no occasion," she answered; "I can bear up well enough, as long as those about me don't know; and though my trial is one which I know time can hardly soften, still it will teach me to bear it better, and I have no harassing doubts or fears to contend with. From the very first moment, thank God, I saw so clearly what I ought to do that I have not felt one instant's doubt on the subject; and that has helped me wonderfully to bear it. I am glad, too, you brought up the subject, for I want to ask you a question."

"What is that?"

"Does Mrs. Feversham know? I cannot help thinking, from something she said to me at Riverston, that she does."

"She knows that there is an hereditary tendency in Lady Clara's family, and that we had been very anxious about Lady Clara herself. I told her all that myself, with Sir Rupert's sanction. She is a very sensible woman, and Lady Clara was so fond of her, I thought her influence

might be useful; but she knows nothing either about Lady Bellingham or about how fully for a time our fears for Lady Clara were realised. The only person in the world, as far as I know, who knows the whole truth besides myself, is Mrs. Parsons."

"I am glad of it," said Maud, with a sigh, "and now no more of that. I think I will write a note to Guy this afternoon, and ask him to come over here to-morrow; and then, when I know exactly how soon he is going north, I will settle about our leaving."

"I obeyed your injunctions at the priory," Doctor Marsh said, as he rose to leave.

"What injunctions?" Maud asked.

"As to not letting Mrs. Darryll come near you to-day."

"Ah, true, I had forgotten," she said. "Is she in a great state about it?"

"Tremendous! I told her you were not quite well, and she was for rushing off on the moment, and when I said I thought you would be better left alone to-day, she was in a wild state; half distressed at the thought that you were ill, and half indignation at the idea that her absence could possibly be an advantage; so I was obliged to be rather peremptory."

"I wish I had not said it now," Maud replied. "Perhaps it will be bad for her. I almost wish you had let her come. I did not think of that."

"Do you ever think about yourself?" Doctor Marsh asked.

"Yes, very often," Maud answered, not in the least seeing the drift of the question.

"Can't say I see it," Doctor Marsh said; "but you need not alarm yourself about Mrs. Darryll. You may rest assured that nothing that does not personally concern herself will ever affect her strongly enough to endanger her safety. At this moment she is thinking a precious deal more about the misery she is suffering, at the thought that you are ill, than disinterestedly about you. Why, she is positively incapable of grasping any idea absolutely independent of herself."

"Surely you are too severe, doctor."

"You don't know as much of egotists as I do," he answered; "no one who has not watched their proceedings, as I have done, from an independent standing point, can understand them; and now, good-bye again, and would to Heaven there were a few more women in the world like you. There would be better men than there are, if there were."

He was gone before Maud had time to answer;

and with a half smile at the absurd lengths—as she considered them—to which his affection for her carried him, she sat down to write a note to Guy Rivers. More than once as she wrote she had to stop to wipe away the blinding tears that rose; but she did not know herself what a depth of tenderness her feelings at the moment threw into her gentle chidings to him for having ever gone to Archerfield; knowing, as he must have done, what Doctor Marsh had told her about the place. She told him, if his conscience smote him for any derelictions of duty, he was to come over to the deanery directly, and she would give him full absolution, without requiring any confessions, and urged him, under any circumstances, to come, as she wanted to see him particularly. His guardian angel must surely have been prompting her as she wrote.

Sir Guy's information to Mr. Wellwood in his hurried note of apology for his strange conduct at the vicarage, that he intended to leave Riverston that day, was not quite consistent with truth. He had no settled intention at the moment he wrote of doing anything. He was too wretched still to think about anything; he only did not want any one to come near him. He could not shake off the wretched feeling of depression with

which he had woke from his heavy stupefying sleep that morning. Memory would not let him rest. Again and again Pauline's lovely face would come up before him, and he seemed to feel again the soft touch of her white shoulder, and he would shudder all over. Then the thought of Maud would come, and that was almost worse. He wandered restlessly about the house and grounds, longing to do something and able to do nothing, because he could not summon courage to do the only thing he knew would bring him any relief. He had not the courage to face Maud and the deanery, and that very consciousness made him feel more hopelessly wretched. The evening found him still at Riverston, as restless and unhappy as when he woke in the morning, and still as undecided what to do; and, too feverish to sleep, he tossed about all night, counting the hours as they struck, and longing for daylight. The darkness and stillness of night were almost maddening.

"Here's the post bag, Mrs. Parsons," said Sir Guy's own man, entering with it in his hand; "where's the key?"

"You give the bag to me," was the answer.

Mrs. Parsons unlocked the bag and took out

the letters. "Thank God!" she exclaimed, as she glanced over them.

"You're very devout this morning, Mrs. Parsons; but will you kindly allow me to take Sir Guy's letters upstairs? He won't be pleased if he happens to have heard the boy come, and has to wait; and he's rather apt to be awake about this time in the morning."

"I'm going to take up the letters myself," Mrs. Parsons replied.

"I'm sure you're very welcome," answered the man, "and if you choose to volunteer to dress Sir Guy as well, I've not the slightest objection, under existing circumstances. It's my opinion ——"

"Hold your tongue, you fool," was Mrs. Parsons' extremely uncivil rejoinder. "Who cares for your opinion about anything?"

"Well, I'm sure!" began the astonished valet; but Mrs. Parsons and the letters were gone, so he did not finish the sentence. Before she had had time to reach Sir Guy's room, his bell rang furiously. "No better this morning," the man muttered to himself; "precious glad she did take the letters up. I'm sure I wish she would act valet as well."

"What the devil do you mean, sir?" Sir Guy began, as Mrs. Parsons entered; and then he

stopped short, on seeing who it was. "What's brought you up?" he said, in a milder tone. "I thought it was Willis."

"I came to see how you were this morning, Sir Guy, and to bring you your letters."

"Oh, I'm all right or all wrong; I'm sure I don't know which, and don't much care either. Give me the letters; you can leave all the papers on the table."

Mrs. Parsons handed him the letters. She had purposely placed one, the writing of which she knew, on the top. She saw her master start, and almost shudder, as his eye fell upon the direction.

"Tell Willis not to come here till I ring," he said, in a husky tone, as Mrs. Parsons turned to leave the room.

"Very well, Sir Guy."

For a long time Sir Guy lay with Maud's note crushed in his hand, before he could summon courage to open it. The mere sight of her handwriting seemed to increase the bitterness of his self-reproaches; but at last, with a sort of desperate determination, he tore it open and commenced reading it. Before he had read many lines, the expression of his face began to change; a softer look came over it,

and something suspiciously bright spalrked in his eyes, and made him pass his hand across them. "Pshaw! what a fool I am," he muttered, and tried to steel himself against the weakness, but it was no use. Maud's gentle reproaches were too powerful for him, and by the time he had reached the end of her letter, he could hardly see to read the signature for the blinding tears. He passionately kissed the letter, and then, burying his face in the pillow, cried like a child. But what untold relief those tears brought him! All his restlessness; all the bitter, hard feelings which had been tormenting him; all the dull heavy pain which seemed for so long to have been beating on his brain—passed away with them; and when at last, in very shame at his weakness, he succeeded in regaining calmness, he felt a different man. He felt he could obey Maud's summons to the deanery now, and though he could not tell her quite all that had passed, he could at least confess how much he had suffered for breaking the promise he had made her, and entreat her to forgive him. The barrier between them was gone, and peace had come back to him again. It was a long time before he rang his bell, and when he did, Mrs. Parsons appeared, not Willis.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Guy," she said; "but I thought I'd just ask you whether I shouldn't send up your breakfast."

"Come here, nurse," was Sir Guy's answer.

"What is it, Sir Guy?" she said, anxiously, as she approached his bed.

"It's all right, now, old woman," he said, smiling. "I know you've been in an awful taking since yesterday morning, and you weren't far wrong, either. I've been nearer going to the devil than I've been a long time; but you brought the only thing that could do me any good this morning. Did you know that?"

"Yes, I did. Oh, Master Guy, do go over there."

"I'm going to-day. I do feel awfully jolly now, though I shan't soon forgive myself, I know," he added, in a lower tone; "but it is such a blessing to have got rid of that awful feeling. Go and get breakfast for me in the library, old woman, and send Willis up, and I'll be over at Stowminster in the course of a couple of hours."

"Oh, thank God! thank God!" Mrs. Parsons murmured again, as she went downstairs. "God bless her sweet face. She'll be the saving of him yet, my poor dear young master."

When Willis came down from his master's dressing-room, half an hour after, he reported that Sir Guy was like a young lamb this morning, for which piece of information he was rewarded by receiving a sharp rebuke from Mrs. Parsons.

In little more than two hours after, Sir Guy abruptly entered the deanery drawing-room. Maud was alone, sitting on a low couch by the window. He hastily crossed the room, and, without speaking, threw himself down on the floor beside her, and buried his face in the folds of her dress.

There was something almost like a mother's love in the gentle tenderness with which Maud bent over him, and laid her hand caressingly on his fair curling hair; but she did not speak; perhaps she could not. It was a trying moment to her that—in a certain sense—first meeting. She so thoroughly, though so unconsciously, understood how to manage him too. No words could have done what the gentle passing of her hand over his head did for him. After a while, with a sigh, he looked up, and then she softly kissed his forehead. Nor did he shrink from the kiss.

"What is it, Guy?" she said.

"Nothing, thanks to you!" he answered. "But I very nearly came to grief, Maud. I should have done, but for you."

"How?" she asked, anxiously.

That he could not tell her. "I ought never to have gone over to that place," he answered, "but I've been bitterly punished. It's a bad place for any young man, let alone an excitable fellow like me. It's done me harm enough."

"But what do you mean about coming to grief?"

"That the evil influence of Archerfield laid hold of me, and I was very nearly saying words that would have been remembered against me to my ruin. I should have said them but for the thought of you."

"Guy, you must never go there again," she said.

"Go there again! Maud, you wouldn't think it necessary to say that if you knew what a sharp lesson I've had. It will last me my lifetime, I know."

"God grant it may!" she said. "Oh, Guy! Guy! you must not run foolish risks; remember your life is mine now, not yours. Don't, by your own rash act, raise a barrier between us."

He started. Could it be possible she knew

more than he supposed? Her words seemed to fall in strangely with what had passed. "How should it do that?" he said.

"You know if papa is not satisfied, he will not give his consent."

"He shall be satisfied," he exclaimed, vehemently. "I really didn't know my danger before. It is so different now from what it was; but I've had my lesson, and I'll take precious good care in future. Raise a barrier between us! don't talk of it. It would be an everlasting barrier between Heaven and me. But what is the matter with you?" he exclaimed suddenly, looking earnestly at her. "You are pale and looking worn. Are you ill? Oh, Maud, what is the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter," she replied, "save that two troublesome charges have been causing me a good deal of anxiety lately."

"One won't do it again," he said. "That's another stab for my conscience to give, to know I have caused you trouble. But who is the other?"

"Isabel."

"What's the matter with her?"

"She has not been well for a long time, and of late I have been feeling very anxious about

her. That was what I wanted to talk to you about."

"I thought she was getting awfully crusty before I left," Guy answered, "and that's always a bad sign. But it's no use to talk to me, Maud, I can't do anything. I tell you what it is: though you scolded me for saying something of the kind once before, I do believe Isabel and I are both possessed."

Maud shuddered. "Guy, I will not have you say that. You don't know how it distresses me."

"But, upon my word, it's true. I'm quite sure the devil gets firm hold of both of us sometimes. No one who was not under his special care at the moment could go on as Isabel does occasionally; and I know I sometimes feel exactly as if an evil spirit was trying to make me do a wicked thing, in spite of myself, and ——"

He broke off short, startled by a heavy sob from Maud.

"Maud, my darling," he exclaimed, "I did not mean to vex you. Don't look like that."

Maud regained her self-command in a moment. "You must not talk in that way, Guy. I cannot tell you how it pains me; and, what is more,

you must not indulge the thought; it is a dangerous one. You will get into a way of thinking that you cannot help doing things which you know to be wrong, if you let the idea once get hold of your mind."

"*Regina mia*," he said, raising her hand to his lips, "your will is law. I will at least try never to think about it again."

Maud smiled, but only for a moment, and then she said, "Now about Isabel."

"What about her? I can't do anything with her."

"I know that, but Doctor Marsh wants her very much to go away for a little change, and she won't while I'm at home."

"She's a fool," put in Sir Guy. "That's just the way she went on about Ethel Vere, for a few months, and then they quarrelled like blazes, and all Isabel's doing. Ethel would never have quarrelled with any one."

"Never mind about Lady Ethel Vere, but listen to me," Maud said. "You are very refractory, this morning. I want to know when you are going to the north, for then, I think, we shall leave home, and I don't doubt Doctor Marsh will be able to persuade Isabel to go too."

"I must be down in the north, the agent says, by the end of January."

"And how long will you be away?"

"Six weeks at least," he answered, with a sigh.

"Six weeks!" Maud said. "Surely that is a long time?"

"Yes; but there's a great deal to be done. There's one thing, I shall feel as if it was a step forward. It's my marrying necessitates all this bother, and it will help to pass the time. Oh, Maud! if only next October were come!"

"Where shall you stay while you are down there?"

"I've got a shooting-box there. I shall stay there. Charlie Rivers, and one or two other fellows, will come down."

"Oh, Guy!"

"You needn't fear, Maud, darling. I havn't asked a single fellow yet, and I promise you I'll only ask quiet ones. I believe, after all," he added, gravely, "the lesson I've had will be a blessing in the end. By Jove! there comes Isabel, walking as if she had a wager."

In a few minutes Mrs. Darryll was in the room. "Dear Maud, how are you this morning?" she exclaimed. "I have been so miserable about

you; it was too cruel not to let me come and see you yesterday. Let me look at you; why, you are pale. Oh, you don't know how wretched I have been."

"Very causelessly then, I can assure you, for there has been very little the matter with me."

"Oh, but anything about you makes me so dreadfully anxious."

"I should think that sort of affection was rather fatiguing, isn't it?" said Sir Guy, coolly.

Isabel turned sharply round; she had not seen him, till he spoke. "What, you here, Guy? I certainly didn't expect to see you."

"Didn't you? I'm surprised at that. Is Darryll at home?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll go up to the priory. Come up to luncheon, Maud," and he opened the window, and stepped out as he spoke.

"Well, Maud," exclaimed Mrs. Darryll, "I do think that is too bad."

"What is too bad?"

"That you could see Guy, and wouldn't see me."

"I never made any difficulty about seeing you to-day. In fact, I was just going to pro-

pose to Guy to walk up to the priory, when you came in, and I did not see Guy yesterday. Not, however, that I think he would be quite prepared to admit the justice of your complaint."

"I daresay not, though I do not believe that Guy loves you nearly as well as I do."

"We needn't discuss that," Maud answered, rather wearily.

"Oh, I daresay you don't believe it now, but you will do some day."

"I hope Doctor Marsh scolded you well yesterday," Maud said.

"He did indeed. Do you know, Maud, he thinks I am really much more ill than I imagined. He positively quite frightened me, and he made me tell him all about all sorts of things which happened before I was married. He said it was madness to have allowed that restlessness, and disinclination to eat, and those constant headaches, to go on so long unheeded. In fact, I begin to think I have got off better than I might have expected. Don't you think I have?"

"No, I don't think I shall," Maud answered absently.

"Why, Maud!" exclaimed Mrs. Darryll, "are you dreaming?"

"I really beg your pardon, Isabel, but my thoughts had wandered. I am very glad you have seen Doctor Marsh, and I hope you mean to follow his instructions."

"Yes, indeed I do, for I am really frightened by all he said. What should I do if I was to have a serious illness? I am sure I could not bear it. Just think, if it should have come when you were busy preparing for your marriage, and so would not have been able to come and see me a great deal. I am seriously thinking, when you are married, of making Edgar let the priory, and try and get some place nearer Riverston. I shall be so miserable when you are gone from the deanery."

Maud could stand it no longer. All this had been wearying enough before, but it was intolerable now; when her shaken nerves had quite enough to do to support her own burden. But still she answered gently and calmly—

"There is plenty of time yet to think about all that; but if you are going to wait here for me to go with you to the priory, you must amuse yourself for a little; I have several things to do before I shall be ready to start."

"Can't I do them for you? You never will let me do anything for you, and you do look ill

and tired. I am sure I can do anything you want. If you cared for me as I do for you, you would let me help you more."

"The only way you can help me now is not to worry me," Maud said, a little sharply, and then in a moment wished she had not said it; but she was but human, and she was sorely tried at that instant. Nor was the wish purely disinterested either, for Mrs. Darryll's feelings were so sorely wounded by the sharp answer that Maud had some trouble to stave off a fit of hysterics.

The morning's experience strengthened Maud's determination to shake off her tormentor, for a time at least, as soon as Guy was gone, and that very evening it was settled, with a secret determination on the dean's part, that if, when they returned home, he saw the look which was on Maud's face at that moment coming back to it, he would take very decided steps to prevent her seeing much of Mrs. Darryll, for, at least, as long as it was in his power to prevent it.

Could it be possible, Maud thought, when she went up to her room that night, that it was little more than forty-eight hours since Doctor Marsh's fatal disclosures? She felt as if it must be much longer; and how heavy the burden was! Would

habit ever make it seem lighter, or enable her to bear it more firmly? She could not tell; she only felt very weary, and with an earnest prayer on her lips for strength and patience, she fell asleep.

But for the anxiety he felt about Maud, the dean's heart would have been lighter that night than it had been since her engagement, for he had had a chat with Doctor Marsh that afternoon, and his assurance that subsequent events had made him think the promise he had asked from the dean an unnecessary one had relieved his hearer's mind considerably. The dean had always had a secret fear that he might hear something from Doctor Marsh which would make him regret the sanction he had given, and yet not make him feel he should be justified in recalling it.

END OF VOL. II.

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